



eartrip

Issue 2 - September 2008

a journey for your ears

Alexander Hawkins



Hugh Hopper

John Zorn

Reviews

Articles

Criticism

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EDITORIAL

"Now the Billy Taylor Trio, with Charlie Mingus on bass, Marquis Foster on drums, and, on piano, a man who has a mastery of metre and metaphor equivalent, in another field, to, let's say, Marianne Moore. Anyway, here's a problem in emotionally-applied semantics - 'What is this thing Called Love'?"

Recently, I happened to be listening to a recording of Billy Taylor's Trio, performing at Storyville in 1951, in which Nat Henthoff makes the preceding announcement. Notice anything unusual about it? Does the comparison of a jazz musician with a renowned poet stand out at all?

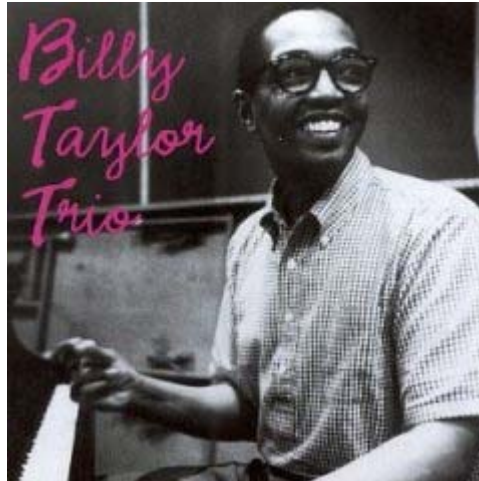
I'm sure that some people's first reactions will be to scoff at Henthoff's pretentiousness, to assume that he has somehow gone too far, has overreached in his claims for the music – that he has given jazz the sort of status which it should not claim. Yes, they'll grant you Kerouac – he was openly influenced by jazz, and there does seem to have been some sort of equivalence between a jazz solo and the improvisational flow of his writing. He did coin the term 'spontaneous *bop* prosody', after all. But, beyond that 50s Beat milieu, you'd better stay in your boxes – if jazz is art, it's not art with a capital A. It's as if there's a worry that jazz will somehow become tainted by 'high art' and lose its earthiness, its popular appeal (although anyone with the faintest grasp on reality should realize that the days when jazz was a popular music are long gone). What a lot of musicians and critics seem afraid of above all is pretentiousness – *pretending* to a status which it isn't theirs to claim.

I won't deny that there *are* problems with Henthoff's lofty comparison: for instance, the use of the word 'metaphor' - how can that work musically? In relation to a form so fundamentally abstract, it seems a little odd to describe one (abstract) thing in terms of another (abstract) thing – although that's not to deny that sounds have resonances beyond their immediately heard qualities (the inflection of content by form, as in M.L. Gasparov's concept of the 'semantic halo' that surrounds particular poetic forms, imbuing the words they contain with meanings beyond those of the words themselves). There's also a slightly uncomfortable mixture of the 'high' - the trio's performance is described as "musical anacrostics", Taylor as "the prolific composer, expert on ragtime, mambo, Bach fugues and James Joyce" - with the 'low', and the hipsterish slang of such formulations as "this is a story about a chick called 'Laura'."

Still, whatever the nuances Henthoff overlooked when making Billy Taylor the jazz equivalent of Marianne Moore, I can think of few people who would dare to make such comparisons today, unless in very generalized terms, where any poet, from Shakespeare to Eliot, would do. (An exception would be someone like Brian Morton, as attested by his piece in a recent edition of Bill Shoemaker's wonderful online journal Point of Departure, in which he talks about the kinship between Steve Lacy and Robert Creeley.)

Of course, there *is* jazz/poetry crossover, but it tends to occur more in avant-garde realms – Steve Dalachinsky, who's worked with Matthew Shipp and John Tchicai – or, in the world of free improv –Derek Bailey's reading out of excerpts from Peter Riley's poetry while playing guitar on 'Takes Fakes and Dead She Dances'. Furthermore, such

collaborations are more often than not ignored, much in the same way that adventurous British poetry of the 60s and beyond, by the likes of Riley, J.H. Prynne and Tom Raworth, was confined to small presses and a limited readership of devoted admirers (which enabled its opponents to criticize it as elitist, though they were actually the ones suppressing it). Too obscure for the majority of people to have even heard of it, and too oppositional, too serious for the ‘sophisticated’ purveyors of taste, it found itself in an uncomfortable no-man’s land, much in the same way that ‘serious’ jazz does today.



To look at the issue from a slightly different angle, let’s consider the relationship between jazz and another form that is generally considered ‘high art’: classical music. Concerts often showcase the jazz-influenced works of Gershwin, Milhaud or Leonard Bernstein, but do not focus on arguably far more serious fusions by the likes of the AACM musicians or other adventurously-minded artists. When was the last time the token jazz concert at the BBC Proms featured compositions by Anthony Braxton or Ornette Coleman? It’s as if the classical establishment want to re-assure themselves that jazz doesn’t pose a serious challenge to the supremacy of classical music, while on the other hand jazzers are happy to go along with this because they don’t want to seem ‘stuffy’ or ‘elitist’. If Nigel Kennedy wants to get “down with the kids”, he plays jazz. If Gwyllim Simcock wants to seem a little bit clever, he writes a piano concerto (and receives praise for being “classically-trained,” as if that automatically makes him better than a mere jazzier). But, apart from these compromise efforts (and more worthy ventures such as the gritty, punchy compositions of Mark-Anthony Turnage), little meaningful common-ground is found between the two genres. Furthermore, at a time when post-modern academics are writing tomes of jargon on Madonna or cock rock, one might expect jazz to be given some serious attention, but, no – jazz gets ignored once again.

So, it seems to me that we just don’t have, in the main, a sense of jazz as art. By this, I don’t mean art as a monolithic concept which can only exist at the expense of entertainment, or accessibility – though, of course, that latter, frequently-used term begs the question, ‘accessible to whom?’ (as well as, ‘who dictates this access?’).

Tim Berne’s comments on a recent edition of BBC Radio 3’s ‘Jazz Library’ connect with these issues –while discussing his own music, which is arguably far more ‘difficult’ than Billy Taylor’s, he argued that he sees it as a product, not as art. “It’s a product. I want my music heard.” He was talking about this in relation to the positive

steps taken by artist-controlled labels, such as Artistshare, to which my automatic response was that, if the artists control these labels, then surely this means that they should be not dictated to by the 'needs' (read 'wants') of the market-place, by what some label head wants to push on them – that they can create the music they want. I realise that musicians have to deal with realities – no jazz musician, especially who creates such music as Berne's, has enough money to survive simply doing what they want. Yet, from Berne's comment, it seems that the necessity of making money and shifting product seeps in and infects the very idea of music's importance– value now becomes monetary value only, rather than something beyond that. An artistic statement is judged by how much money it sells for, rather than for saying something about human experience (or constituting a human experience in itself).



Musician Joe Higham makes some perceptive comments on an online message board: "If you look around at the music/arts scene it's less about the music and more about marketing and subsidies - check out Jazzwise to see all the 'now on a UK tour ... subsidised by'etc. Look at MySpace, YouTube, personal websites and of course jazz mags such as Jazzwise: you'll notice how everything is moving in this direction – i.e. glossy with not always so much content, self publicity & hard sell. Looking at MySpace you'll notice how some groups who are almost unknown are doing extensive tours of Europe through plenty of 'chatch' on the telephone, subsidies, old boy connections (Berkley etc) and the like. In general the music is fairly average, but the public doesn't seem to notice as they are also sold on the marketing coming at them via websites et al - and so it goes!"

There's not the equivalent sense in classical music – well, perhaps it is creeping in with the increasing focus on marketable, good-looking opera singers (cue photo-shoots, low-cut dresses, copious amounts of make-up) or on 'crossover artists' like string quartet Bond (remember them?) and Il Divo. But, in the main, it still takes its role seriously. As Berne hints, we live in a consumerist society where the realities of the situation mean a focus on money at the expense (no pun intended) of everything else. But no one suggests that we should consider the latest recording of Wagner's Ring Cycle as a 'product' rather than as art. So why does jazz feel the need to subsume itself so totally to the reductive demands of capitalist machinery?

I realize that it may seem strange for the editor of a magazine which devotes a large part of its space to reviews of 'product', to espouse such an anti-product viewpoint. Yet I would still argue that, while the 'product culture' may be inescapable (even if I find it repulsive how some embrace the glitzy festival circuit), jazz must preserve its integrity. To aim for the same kind of success enjoyed by pop musicians is to aim for something long gone, for something in the past. Society has 'progressed'/ regressed past that stage, and it often feels like it will only be satisfied with the lamest soul-sapping shit. So perhaps musicians should just get on with the process of making art - sure, it can be entertaining (though I do have a problem with the constant stigmatization of the term 'highbrow', as if it was one of the items on George Carlin's dirty words list!), but it has to have seriousness of purpose too.

One way of avoiding this product problem is the setup of the so-called net-labels,

which distribute artists' recordings for free as high-quality MP3s, along with artwork. There are also CD-R labels, like Jordan Schrantz' Tiger Asylum, which tread half-way between the ephemerality of the digital download and the physical 'thing-ness' of the CD – to an extent (we still don't really know how effective CD-Rs will prove to be as a long-term means of storing information), they emphasise a lack of durability, that the recording is only a snapshot of a living music. As Amiri Baraka wrote of Albert Ayler, the recordings were only 'rumours' of what he sounded like live. And he wasn't just talking about Ayler – he was also saying that jazz is living music, that music moves in time, that it can't be commodified and made into product because it is more transient and transcendent than that; it cannot be a lifestyle accessory, or should not, anyway.

Will you remember their names
or do they have no names
No lives-only products
to be used when you wanta
dance fuck & cry

(Jayne Cortez, *'How Long has Trane Been Gone?'*)

Music loses its soul when it becomes a lifestyle choice, like buying a new sofa, a new tube of toothpaste or a bar of soap. "The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal," raps Gil Scott-Heron on the still-relevant 'The Revolution will not be Televised' – but it's almost as if that's exactly what it would be expected to do if it came around, and the artists are buying into that. The idea that art could be politically relevant is considered almost taboo (beyond the Geldoff/Bono 'let's all wave our arms in the air and feel good about ourselves because we *care* about all those poor starving African babies, and about the planet, so we're going to haul up some huge energy bills to show that') – hence the pieces on art and politics in this issue.

Returning to the net- and CD-R labels, I must make clear that I am not wholeheartedly advocating them as *the* future of jazz and improvised music. Often, there's little quality control, so what gets released is variable, but at least it allows the work to be heard – and that work is just as often as good, if not better, than the 'product' released on major labels.

It also connects with some of the issues raised in George Lewis' seminal new history of the AACM, 'A Power Stronger than Itself' (reviewed at length later in this issue), particularly those relating to collectivism, shared interest and communality. As Lewis notes, jazz and related forms of improvised music provide a model which is at once both strongly individualistic and strongly collective – something which political systems fail to match, invariably having to deal with the problems caused by the two being in conflict.

To an extent, the internet provides a political model as well, with the possibility for groups of like-minded people to gather together without regard to national, geographical and racial boundaries (Steve Coleman's written very persuasively on this, in an article I touched on during the previous issue). There's also the vast availability of shared information: to take one instance, a new FTP project, the Free Jazz Research group, has recently been set up by blogger Pierre Crépon. Users share their private collections, thus giving access to material that would otherwise be very hard to obtain:

rare interviews and articles, in English and French, from magazines such as Cadence, Jazz Hot and Downbeat, which provide information about little-documented figures such as Marzette Watts and Alan Shorter.

The possibilities of technology, and of the internet in particular, could be very positive – it seems that the jazz and improv community hasn't really embraced them to the full yet, although ventures such as the aforementioned Free Jazz Research group, the various net labels, and the 'sharity' blogs showcased in Issue 1 of 'eartrip', suggest interesting directions for the future. With that in mind, this issue makes something more of the interactive nature possible with a digital publishing format – thus, one of the articles is not really an 'article' at all, but a stream-of-consciousness MP3 file in which Anthony Whiteford, whose piece on Cecil Taylor in the previous issue provoked some strong reactions, talks about the relation between politics and music in his life.

There's also going to be more of a focus on music coming out on the smaller labels, as well as alternative formats – music distributed as internet downloads, often for free (by net-labels like Clinical Archives), or handed out at gigs, where the money goes directly to the artists. This means that you might not recognize some of the names in the review section – but that doesn't mean their music isn't worth hearing. Listening to albums for review in this issue reminded me just how much great music there is, still being created – it's easy to fall into a rather melancholy analysis of the current scene if looking solely at the jazz mainstream, but, prod under the surface and all manner of thought-provoking and life-enhancing wonders spill out.

I'll just pop in a quick round-up of what you can expect in the following pages. There are also a couple of interviews, with bassist Hugh Hopper, and with pianist Alexander Hawkins; one musician who has been on the scene since the 60s, and one who is just emerging as one of the most striking voices of his generation, both with unique things to say and unique ways of expressing them (both musically and in these interviews). In the gig reviews section, there are reports on a saxophone giant Wayne Shorter's return to the UK, as well as a gig by Mr Hawkins' new ensemble. And there are CD reviews aplenty, including the follow-up to fORCH's 'spin networks' (which was one of eartrip's 2007 discs of the year) and some tasty free jazz reissues.

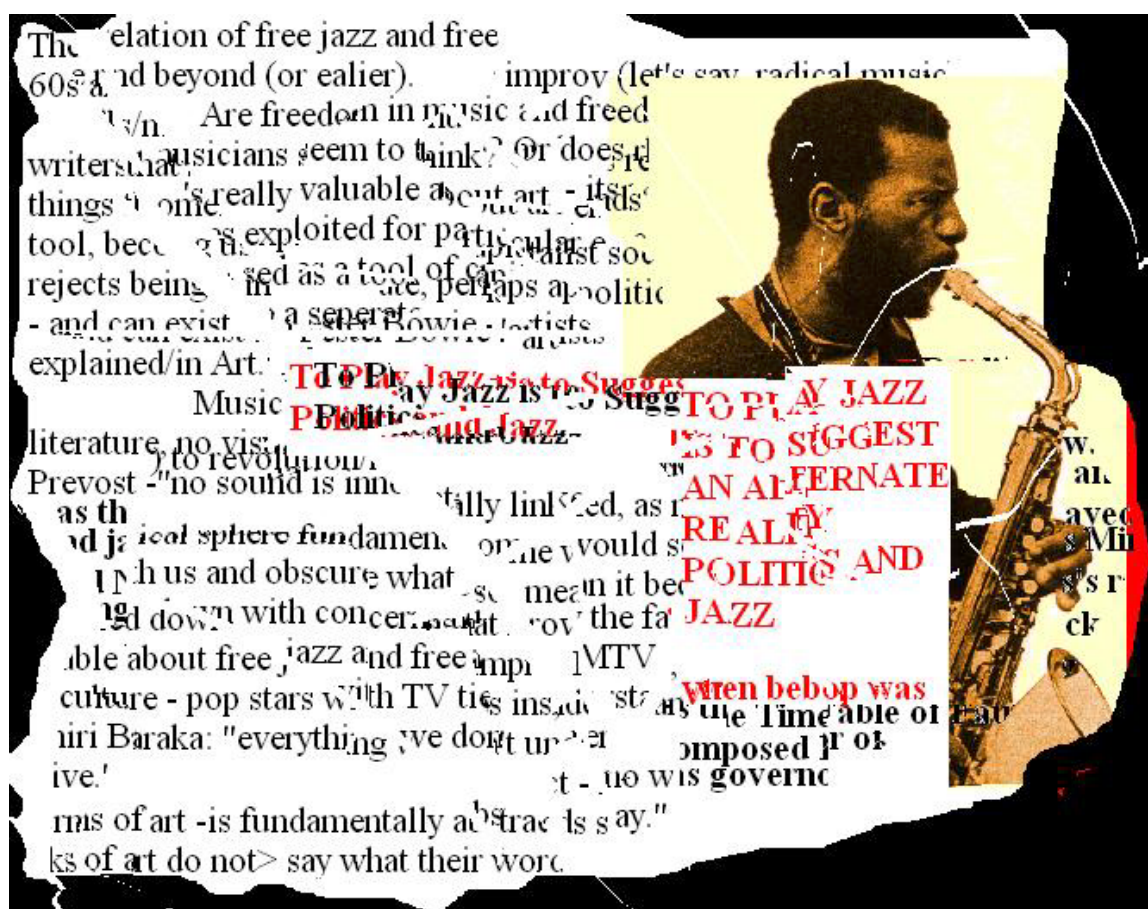
Finally, the response to eartrip, issue 1, seems to have been positive, with the general consensus being an endorsement of its large scope and length. Some criticisms have also been raised: for instance, someone pointed out to me some contentious statements I'd made in some of my own writing. I still believe that what I was trying to say was valid, but I acknowledge that the way I expressed it was crude and appeared simplistic - just the sort of thing 'eartrip' sets out to avoid! What 'eartrip' does not seek, however, is a bland uniformity of opinion. This magazine is not meant to exist in a vacuum: it's meant to stimulate debate and make its readers think about the topics it addresses, whether you agree or disagree with them. For me, it's great that one piece can be described, in the space of a couple of days, as both one of the best and one of the worst pieces of writing on music that the respective readers had encountered! So keep letting me know what you think – suggestions for improvements, arguments with things that have been written in the magazine, and so on.

David Grundy

Comments are always welcome; there were a pleasingly high number of responses to the first issue, and it would be great to know how the second is received as well. So, send your suggestions, corrections and thoughts to dmgrundy@hotmail.co.uk, or write to David Grundy, Robinson College, Cambridge, CB3 9AN.

Some more things: writers are still very much required (as you'll probably notice, I'm still writing most of the CD reviews) – for articles, for gig, CD, book and DVD reviews, for any idea you think might be suitable for 'eartrip'. It takes me a long time to get the issues together, so, the more people I have to help in the contributions department, the more quickly new issues of 'eartrip' can pop onto your computer screens. And keep on sending CDs for review, to the address listed above – they're very much appreciated, and I'm pretty certain to review almost all of them at some point.

POLITICS AND JAZZ: RADICAL POLITICS, RADICAL MUSIC?



Anthony Whiteford's audio piece is available to download, in MP3 format, at the following link: <http://www.mediafire.com/?mjmwm131qo>.

It can also be streamed from the eartrip blogsite.

Music is the Healing Force of the Universe:

The Differing Statuses of Modernism in Visual Art and Music

By David Grundy

Modernist (and post-modernist) visual art has arguably become part of our visual culture - we think nothing of a once-shocking Picasso painting and Warholian collages are part and parcel of TV makeover design. But modernist music hasn't permeated mainstream musical culture to nearly the same extent. Why is that modernism in the visual arts has received so more widespread acceptance than modernism in music? Virtually everyone knows who Picasso is, and could probably recognize one of his works if they tried, but mention Schoenberg or Cecil Taylor or Captain Beefheart and you'll either get a bemused, non-comprehending look or a sigh of disgust.

* * *

Is it because music reaches to a deeper level, cuts to the heart, cuts beneath the barriers we can construct between ourselves and what we see, what we read? We can filter these through our mind, we can take time to consider them: we can look at a work of art for minutes on end, because it exists as an object in space, we can read a sentence from a book and then ponder it for several minutes before moving on to the next sentence. But music is different: you can't keep pausing it to digest the latest bit of information, and you can't stand around it to examine the details as you can with a painting or sculpture – except afterwards, in your mind, or, if you're very dedicated, and have the appropriate technology, by going back to the track and playing it a few seconds at a time. If you listen to a piece of music, you have to let it flow straight into you, and because it's much more of an immediate experience than other art forms, it's also more frightening; it exposes you to the possibility of having to feel.

Sure, you can be moved by a painting or a novel, or a poem, but, I'd argue, not in the same way as you can be moved by music. It catches you off your guard; there's something about it that provokes a deep level of feeling in the listener that is beyond words, beyond images - something deep and mysterious which accounts for its great attraction to so many people. In early cultures this might have been the intense physical sensation of banging the drum (the next step up from banging the bone on the piece of rock, from tapping out the first rhythm), or of letting loose the voice from the throat, in an aesthetised version of such deep-rooted, primeval human noises as the scream, the cry, the laugh. Perhaps the blues are also deeply connected to such sounds. Interestingly, jazz drummer Shelly Manne described the sound of saxophonist Ornette Coleman, a player heavily influenced by blues feeling (if less so by blues form), as “like a person crying...or a person laughing.”

More so than other art forms, then, music thrives on spontaneity, on being something of the moment. As Eric Dolphy puts it in a (much-quoted) interview snippet at the end of his superlative record Last Date, “when you hear music, after it's over, it's gone, in the air. You can never capture it again.” It doesn't exist as an object. It exists as something living, not static - to paraphrase T.S. Eliot, words and music move in (or

through) time. And it's in the twentieth century, with the advent of jazz, and, in particular, the strongly spontaneous languages of free jazz and free improvisation, that music's potentiality for such a flowing, organic, *natural* role was arguably developed to its fullest extent. This is particularly applicable to jazz, as I'll go on to explain. Different performers of classical works undoubtedly bring different interpretative elements to the music, meaning that it can never be heard exactly the same way twice - there is no absolutely precise template for how it should sound, though the musical notation of the composition gives a pretty precise idea. However, such differences are generally minimal - even an extreme case, like Glenn Gould's different recordings of Bach's Goldberg Variations, taking at radically different tempos and with different emotional viewpoints, are recognizably versions of the same notated piece of music.

* * *

Jazz improvisation is a different kettle of fish, though: by its nature, it is something of the moment, expressing the player's socially/culturally/musically conditioned attitudes (whether to a small or large extent depends on the player) but in a spontaneous form which lays them bare. And maybe it's this we don't like - it expresses the things beneath the surface, things we might be uncomfortable with, it implies the loss of control, away from the safety of written notation and into a region where creativity can be exercised in a much freer, looser way.

Now I realize this view of improvisation in jazz is very simplistic, and is certainly not applicable to much of jazz - but that's perhaps also because players and audiences don't really understand what jazz really is (more on this in the next paragraph). Classical music (and pop music, etc, etc) can of course express emotion wonderfully well - I am by no means implying that music being written makes it less viable, less emotionally strong. Far from it, in fact - perhaps having time to think through your ideas and write them down means you express them more fully, you draw out every last inch of emotion. And some jazz seems almost emotionally shallow compared to classical music.

To audiences especially, it becomes just a sound, a way of being less stuffy than classical music but more sophisticated than pop music, an idea of 'cool'. The 'Beat generation' of the 1950s saw writers such as Kerouac linking it with a whole social attitude, so that it became a sort of zeitgeist, the soundtrack to a counter-cultural movement (in much the same way as Hendrix, Santana, et al, would be for the 60s Hippy Movement). But today, jazz is either pleasant, sophisticated background music, or, if not background music, music not to be listened to *that* closely, not to be analyzed too much, because it's not an intellectual form, it's easy on the ear, it's not too much trouble. (An alternative view is that perhaps encouraged by some critical commentary on jazz, that perpetuated by the Fast Show sketch where it becomes a series of stock, smarmy 'hipster' phrases ("nice...great...") and hopelessly members-only musical jargon spinning ("the famous chorus in double time modulating between the keys of B and A flat, and resolving itself in E...crazy!"). In short, it becomes a cliché, without serious thought into what the musical ties that have become clichés once stood for, and what once made them so innovative (such as be-bop melody and phrasing, once at the forefront of jazz modernism, now turned into old hat by decades of use). At its best though, jazz improvisation embodies the qualities expressed a few paragraphs ago: the exercise of creativity in a freer, looser sense than in written music.

However, that's not really the point I'm trying to make here - I'm not trying to argue the case for the virtues of improvisation over composition or vice versa (let's not even begin to get into the complexities of chord changes (limiting the improvisation or tying it down?), jazz composition, and so on). I'm instead trying to argue that music makes us *feel*, hits us in a different, almost physical way that other art forms can't (well, apart from film, which utilizes music for a lot of its emotional appeal, and then adds the actual moving image, an approximation of reality far greater than any other art form – but that makes it a medium which is something else entirely, and out of the scope of this article). The thing with feeling is that we often can't control what we feel, though we can hide it, to the outside world, or even partially to ourselves, through social conditioning and emotional denial, or apathy. And if music makes us feel, then perhaps we're reaching to emotional levels we might not wish to reach - yes, it's fine if it's the easy romantic glow or tear-jerking of the pop ballad, or the brash exuberance of soul music or the 'I don't give a fuck' attitude of rock music. But modernist music? - that's something different. The fact is, a lot of us don't like being put in touch with the pessimism, the despair, the bleakness, the utter *lack of bullshit* that exists in much 12-tone classical music (such as Schoenberg's hideously disturbing *Pierrot Lunaire*), the bizarre, twisted humour of Captain Beefheart's experimental blues-rock, or the anger, the pain, the utter depth of feeling in the free jazz of Archie Shepp or Peter Brotzmann (both using the music to express their radical political views).

The fact is that free jazz, modern classical music, and experimental music of various other forms, expresses what the twentieth century was really all about - progress, to an extent (what progress! technology, arts - you name it, it's progressed massively), but, more importantly, the realization that established forms of authority were corrupt/inadequate (take your pick), and the attempt to overthrow them. The failure of religion, of Communism, of government - all engendered feelings of rebellion and anger and pain, yet at the same time, there was a real sense of vitality and excitement at the changes. This paradox comes through precisely in free jazz - while Schoenberg may be stuck in a gloomy *Ewartung*'s gloomy, pessimistic Expressionist forest, and Webern retreats into a crystalline, microscopic world of his own, the brutality and vitality of free jazz echoes the mixed feelings that the various counter-cultural and rebellious movements of the twentieth century brought with them.

A few lines from T.S. Eliot seem uncannily appropriate to the chaotic nature and apparent randomness of such music:

Words strain,
Crack, and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering
Always assail them."

(*Four Quartets: I – Burnt Norton*)

He could almost be talking about a John Coltrane, Pharoah Sanders or Albert Ayler solo – the cracked notes, multiphonics, and split reed technique are all methods of distorting the pure notes (or words) to try and get at the essence, to express the inexpressible (in Coltrane's case, to express several ideas at once), to get back to the pure sound so often

submerged by the weight of words, of conversation, of musical form - the cry, the scream, the shout.

* * *

It may all be tottering on the edge of the brink (of meaninglessness, of despair, of utter pessimism, of death), but if it's going to go over, it's going to go over with a bang - it's not going to go timidly. Thus, modernist music may seem incomprehensible in terms of our normal expectations of music - meaningless of terms of what has gone before. But in a century inventing new ways of thinking, of acting, of being, perhaps that's what was needed. The Pollockian notion of action painting, the pots of paint chucked directly onto the canvas, comes to mind - Ornette Coleman's landmark recording for 'double quartet', Free Jazz, had a Jackson Pollock painting on the front of the album sleeve, and though Coleman's essentially melody-based, blues-soaked style isn't the best analogy, action painting does have strong parallels with the free improvisations of artists such as Derek Bailey (who once said that the ideal situation to play in would be after you'd just woken up, where you were in a state of consciousness a step below your normal waking state, with all its social/cultural baggage). This is challenging stuff, sometimes moving beyond the levels of feeling I was talking about before (despair, depression, anger, etc) into a strange, colder-seeming realm (Bailey's guitar sound, Webern's miniatures) – but there is feeling there, too. By that, I mean feeling in the sense that the act of making music is in itself a way of expressing one's own humanity, through creativity, and thus asserting one's place in a totally destabilized world in which no one knows where they are any more. Music becomes not just a form of entertainment, but a form of asserting one's identity, be it political and ideological (Brotzmann, Shepp), be it philosophical or religious (Sanders, Ayler, Coltrane), be it simply the act of existing (Bailey). I play (or listen), therefore I am. In an age of no absolutes, music could really be, as Ayler put it, "the healing force of the universe."

why i (still) dig john zorn

by centrifuge



man, a lot of people really *hate* this guy. what is it exactly about him? he's slick, successful, knows how to sell himself - that lot alone would be enough, so i don't plan to look any further for an answer to my own rhetorical question; but as for the hate, i have witnessed it myself first, second and third-hand, seen it repeated time and again, even sometimes by people whose opinions i usually respect: this guy just reduces them to toilet-wall graffiti. having learned the hard way, as i did, that to write about anthony braxton was to invite some harsh judgements and intense ill-feeling (among other things!), then surely now i am standing in full view of the archers and snipers, above the parapet. well, that's ok, go ahead and chuck 'em, this has been growing organically in me for a while now and it's time to let it be birthed: i really dig zorn's music, and it's about time i stuck up for him in a scene where *musicians* apparently love him but many listeners really, really *don't*. i'm going to describe some of the manifold tricks he has up his capacious sleeve, and do so without leaving the confines of *the dreamers*, a 2008 release so **simple** that your editor dismissed it to me as "not too bad, just not really the sort of thing to hold one's attention or be worth too many repeated hearings", admitting that he couldn't "for the life of me work out whether it's meant to be 'ironic' or not". yes, this could very well prove a prickly experience for all you jazzers out there, but y'know, try and stick with me here. believe it or not, the payoff is worth it.

before going any further i want to unpack the concept of "john zorn" a bit. too many people think they have precise, neat (yet often emotionally charged) handles on that name for it to have any meaningful common currency, so let's examine some of the constituent elements a bit more closely.

zorn the catalyst/organiser - everyone likes this version, or at least, all people seem to who are actively involved in creative music (i.e. the tiny minority of people for whom i'm presuming to offer my writing!). critics and the public remain sceptical of the man's motives even here, but joëlle léandre sorted this one out for me once and for all when, reminded by dan warburton¹ that derek bailey's *ballads* album was regarded by some as mere commercialism on zorn's part, she responded: "who are these mean-spirited people? there are few people about with john's generosity and openness of spirit." good enough for her, that's good enough for me, move on to:

zorn the soloist/improviser - "opinions" are split here, between those who rate him as an altoist in particular, and those who don't - but yes, those ironic commas are there for a reason and i have to tell you that if you *really* don't think z's any good as a player, then you and i have little or nothing to say to each other here. on the other hand, people actively involved in the free improv scene readily recognise zorn as one of their own, and have regularly embraced him as such. one listener's ridiculous, hydrophobic rantings about zorn's having embarrassed or even insulted bailey with his own "punk" playing is negated simply by the crashingly obvious fact that the two played together on as-yet-uncounted occasions, and indeed *worked* together on many others. one friend of mine whose experience and opinions i respect a lot says that he has seen zorn play improv in numerous settings, never less than 100% committed, *all the way into it...* which is the most anyone can be asked to bring to such meetings.

¹ interview transcript at <http://paristransatlantic.com/magazine/interviews/leandre.html>

as for individual taste - well, something i am discovering, *two* things i'm discovering on a weekly basis are that my own abilities to hear blurred, distorted or smeared tones and timbres become increasingly refined and acute with repeated (and varied) exposure; that sounds obvious enough, yet the second thing is that - i find this odd - many listeners don't seem to find the same thing, for them a harsh sax sound is a harsh sound, a scream is a scream and that's that. some of them like it, some don't but in any case it always says the same thing, right? well - no, it really doesn't, or that's what i'm finding. if you really listen to zorn in contexts where his status as a soloist is important (not always the case), and you still don't like him... well, fine but again, don't bother telling *me* about it. no, but i do have some sympathy for those who dislike our third figure:

zorn the composer/arranger - by far the least popular of all. ok, so, i can understand that: as with zappa (someone else i still like, though derided by many), zorn can come across as rather utilitarian in his composing. *hey, i got an idea for a band, now i need some songs for it* - hey presto, ten days later there's five albums worth of material, a tour, the works; if it takes off, the project will even spew forth side-projects. yes, but what's inherently *wrong* with this approach? is the proof of the pudding not *always* just in the eating? can we legitimately dismiss some puddings out of hand simply it was too "easy" to cook them?!

again, we may well diverge here, so let's make the full extent of that clear now, *before* i talk you through the album. to me, this man's work is admirable and precious because he is *being the best he can* - like braxton, and as braxton encourages all his students; and with this in mind, yes, even a lowly *piece of trash* can be very beautiful if one simply makes it the *best* piece of trash it can be, or rather if one strives constantly in the attempt. having approached this article cautiously for some weeks now, knowing more or less what i wanted to do but not yet ready to make the attempt, i was inspired last night by watching **tarantino's** shockingly-underrated, generally misunderstood low-brow masterpiece *deathproof* - and this morning, before playing *the dreamers* for the twelfth, maybe fifteenth time at least (yep, holds up to repeated listenings), i warmed up with the second and third **mastodon** albums (*leviathan* and *blood mountain* respectively). these are both examples of artists striving to be the best they can be, in contexts dismissed by many "art" snobs as inherently worthless. i disagree strongly, but if you will insist that "composing" must always entail haemorrhoids and anguish, cannot simply spring into being, maybe you'd better just turn back now. as a writer, zorn makes a good arranger, which is to say that he quickly sets out very specific requirements for a piece and then fills in the details afterwards, albeit with terrific craftsmanship and precision. but... is that really not composition? i strongly suspect that people are just deeply mistrustful of someone who can work *that* fast, that efficiently - he *has* to be a con man of some sort. no, he doesn't, and no, zorn isn't - he really is some sort of magician.

* * *

the dreamers – 2008

[core line-up includes marc ribot, jamie saft, kenny wollesen (on vibes) plus trevor dunn, joey baron and cyro baptista - zorn plays sax only on one track (5 below)]



1. "mow mow" - right away the literal meaning of the album title is made clear: this is a collection of dream pieces, whole experiences in other realms, journeys to faraway places... in this case, a beach at sunset apparently, somewhere like the caribbean or maybe hawaii. now, admittedly there is a certain amount of *chutzpah* in leading off with this piece, because this really could almost be **the shadows**, never mind an ironic postmodern update; it's straight surf music, of the blandest and least threatening kind. but it's only a first track, it sets out the stall for what's on offer without necessarily making any promises at all about the details, never mind the small print. this is a lovely place to inhabit, albeit you might go mad soon enough - but it's brief, anyway, and besides -
 - within ten minutes' time, the voyager will already have been shown things so awful that he might wish he could simply return to the beach and just lie there gently forever. there's dreams and dreams. (you did know that. but had you forgotten..?)

2. "uluwati" - and already we have shifted levels - once, then twice because the knowledge (recognition) of the original dimensional shift itself imparts a further immediate ascension. this piece contains one of the many musical *keys* zorn finds in semitic musics especially: an access code for an alternate plane, in this case almost literally shown to us as a visible silver key, the figure itself being voiced for delicate mallet percussion. *this* place is timeless and once there, one could happily while away hours without the inner critic getting overly irritated... or so i find. and in any case, what is this piece if not a zorn-flavoured, faster, less meditative "so what", built as it is on one timeless mode which contains within itself the seed of a second mode, into which we step just as it seems as though the base mode will never end?

3. "a ride on cottonfair" - this is well and truly in the tradition of some previous zorn tracks threes, specifically "party girl" from *radio* by naked city (to be continued! see below). it's a (jazz) piano trio, basically, light on the palate but dry and with little bittersweet notes; increasingly as it continues, the nature of these becomes clear. even before it does, the enjoyment the musicians take in playing the piece is evident. and why would they not enjoy it? simple, functional jazz exercise though it is, the melody is full of toe-holds; the chance to work with brushes is always seized enthusiastically by baron; dunn gets to show off his contrabass a bit and invite comparisons with greg cohen.

but the piano, now that's where it's at: those darting, askance little looks, cracks in the harmonic image which bespeak monk, elmo hope, sonny clark... and *their* dreams? those entailed lives, let's be clear and honest, ruined by the pill or the needle or the bottle: the medicine we take to facilitate the *passage beyond* and/or to relieve our pain - what price does it have? and what price on top, if *taking the dose* itself becomes the addiction? we are then in man's self-made hell...

4. "anulikwutsay!" - and the outlying provinces of hell's right where we are, as the sun creeps up in the desert... cactus the first things to be picked out, and a shack which we approach with caution - and with good reason, for horrors have taken place here which could change one's view of life permanently in one awful split-second.

this is actually the centrepiece of the album already, a superb feature for ribot, and a western theme, as becomes clear soon enough; but although leone (the obvious tributary via morricone) has plenty of dried blood under his fingernails, this is a *giallo* western, the sort of thing a young lucio fulci might have directed before moving onto zombies.² this is not a nice safe cartoon where guns go bang and bad guys fall down dead. this is the sort of western where some poor miserable wretch ends up with his entrails coiled around a post, or staked out to fry in the noonday sun, quivering eyeballs and tongue torn out at the roots by greedy vultures. you may think i exaggerate grotesquely, but those screams say otherwise. [i have stretched time with this recording! i played the album in a busy stockroom a while ago, with mostly younger people who expected background music, who were told nothing and didn't feel they could ask what the hell i was playing them. some probably thought the organ and obsessive guitar was creepy enough, but as the screams continued, the atmosphere in the room changed palpably, to my secret delight. only much later in the album did someone finally ask what on earth the music was, but these were nine very long minutes..!]

because it is the centrepiece and by far the most open-ended setup, requiring one player to rise to the occasion completely and give an individual performance of great power (not true of the other ten pieces), it's worth hanging around here for a few minutes, before

² the earliest (pre-zombie) fulcis i've seen are *una lucertola con la pelle di donna* (1971, aka *lizard in a woman's skin*) and *non si sevizia un paperino* (1972, aka *don't torture a duckling*); but looking him up on the imdb i see that *lucertola* was already his *twenty-sixth* credit as a director..! maybe no westerns in there, a lot of schlock for certain... and one foreign legion movie, which sounds promising for desert horrors... but evidently it's a comedy.

resuming our brisk progress with tracks 5-11. this piece, singled out by the composer with a name few would speak aloud with any confidence, contains most of the real meat on the album, and as i say, it's fresh and bloody and there's plenty of it.

the first daylight reaches the harmonic ear almost at once, in the form of a gentle percussive glissando, but then right away we have a dry rattle from baptista, washes from the cymbals, an ominous, plodding bass guitar and an uneasy, nagging high pitch from the organ, letting us know right away that this dream is of the kind called *nightmare* - even before the first human scream makes that explicit, ten seconds in. this immediately precedes ribot's first entry, a sad, clanging arpeggiated chord which sets up his second: a prolonged and mangled howl which, in its density, itself probably represents about three percent of the actual musical "movement" in the entire album (this is not a condemnation of the album; but for this piece, it's not "that" sort of album). and much of the rest of that movement is to be heard in the subsequent solo, drawn out across repetitions of the twanging, noirish central motif, first heard at 0.55 and obsessed over, again and again during the course of the piece. ribot is perfect for this, his delight in "mistakes" and clumsy attacks ensuring that every single repetition of the haunting, maddening phrase is worth waiting for, no two are quite alike. [i think ribot may have been contaminated by his association with the chattering classes - some already speak of him as a (long) spent force, but this track alone says otherwise.]

of course the other thing everyone knows about ribot these days is that he's in constant thrall to albert ayler, whose own *transports of ecstasy* marked a whole new level in the music (as is now widely recognised) - and for a moment in the guitar solo, with a peak of intensity being reached and the promise of enlightenment seemingly about to break through, it's as if we could be in heaven rather than in hell, after all; and *right then* is when the screams start again, only this time they don't stop. so the thing about nightmares: we often give this name to our most dense, action-packed dreams and they are often not very enjoyable, nor would one wish to repeat them, yet they offer *so* many chances to learn. in the case of learning about what the human race is and isn't capable of, looking human evil full in the face will be necessary - if painful - relatively early on, if one is to proceed safely in the world at all. right here we have a *dream* which shows us some of the abysmal depths to which the human condition may descend.

it's extraordinarily vivid and picturesque, a soundscape brought to life with stark yet detailed clarity. indeed, it is basically *movie-music* so, again, if anyone has got this far in the hope that i'm going to declare zorn's really j.s. bach after all (not that i would know) - this intense piece of soundtrack work is as deep as it gets here, and if that presents a cognitive problem for some of you... look away now.

but i think it's a (miniature) masterpiece.

* * *

the longest and most intense piece is immediately followed with a an *interlude* of sorts, then the remainder of the album has something of a "counterweight" quality after that

early peak, plenty more pleasant and less troubling dreams to soothe away the awful nightmare... the lessons decrease in intensity; yet occasional dark notes will remain from now on, evoking atavistic memories of the devil's face which lurks behind even the softest, kindest mask among us. but first -

5. "toys" - the only piece which seems to call for a sax in the voicings, hence the only piece on which the leader plays - and he plays only what's required from a sideman, takes the limited amount of wiggle room he permits himself, i.e. one very brief outburst and that's it, instead lets the rhythm guys play with these toys at their leisure... this is a simple enough game, a semitic puzzle piece which swings back and forth like a yo-yo, then twists and turns in on itself to create very intricate patterns within. and just listen to how much fun they have with those toys! [the juxtaposition with my earlier listening reminds me that mastodon have been building on similar ideas, such as the long and very difficult instrumental section in the middle of "capillarian quest" from *blood mountain*... basically quite similar to what saft, wolleson & crew evoke with their bead-stringing here - though this is far looser, of course, a product not of endless rehearsals but of simple instructions given to master players.]

6. "of wonder and certainty" - a perfect example of the bittersweet medicine to come after the intense nightmare, and some cynics out there had better watch out, this one could have them weeping big salty tears into their midnight tippie. this nostalgic power ballad basically turns out to be another feature for ribot, though shorter and far less harrowing than the previous one. here, he really does get to touch the face of god briefly, falling only gently back to earth, channelling sonny sharrock for a while there. and the title of the piece? not some girl's name, but a reminder - voiced explicitly in the thoughtful, measured washes of the theme's release - of the quiet joys and blessings which learning can bring, along with the inevitable pain. [meanwhile, another stage in the multi-ring circus was being set up to accommodate ribot's full-blown pursuit of the same ecstasy he touches on here, in the shape of *asmodeus*, book of angels vol. 7. just the title/s of the latter series represents (the perspective which follows) a worthwhile piece of deconstruction.]

7. "mystic circles" - another lovely "hypno-key" in the manner of track 2, but *such* masterful deployment of sounds on this: to call this degree of sonic alchemy "production" seems woefully inadequate. and although this dream is again timeless - and thus does not move very far - there is still as much detail packed into any tiny fragment as the experiencer cares to seek (as indeed is the case with tarantino or **trey parker** and **matt stone**... frame by frame *the best they can be*, etc etc).

8. "nekashim" - whatever else we achieve with any of this, can we at least clear up once and for all the suggestion that zorn was somehow "flirting" with jewish music and hence (again) just being cynical? if any remaining doubts about the validity or honesty of his approach to those musics could just be screwed up and thrown neatly into the bin, please, as it's passed round... he has demonstrated many times in recent years how many different, useful things he has absorbed from his research, and here is a sort of "learning song", full of grace notes and half-glimpses; it's a lesson spelled out by dancers, whose

eye contact has one brow cocked ever so slightly throughout, but not in self-mocking irony, rather in shared recognition.

9. "exodus" - heh, we are right back to naked city again with this, indeed back to *radio* - and when the theme is actually picked up after the crime-scene exposition, sure enough it turns out to have blood ties to "metaltov", the ringer or rogue piece in the masada book, originally waxed by the earlier (non-kosher) quintet. still given somewhat dreamlike *qualities* by the keys and vibes, this is more movie music, and not really a dream piece as such - this piece and "toys" possibly stand out as the least consistent with the overall concept, but i don't really want to pick any more holes than i have to and besides, john is asking me here if i will please remind everyone again about *radio* by naked city which is an underrated, indeed unjustly neglected album deserving of far better listeners.

10. "forbidden tears" - aha, yes, i believe i've drunk (and been drunk) from that draught before, the sweet wine in the harem which turns out to be laced with sedatives... this, then, a sly *erotic nightmare*, subtly disturbing for sure, but far less harsh than the full-daylight, full-darkness version on show earlier. (this one, on that day in the stockroom, sounded the most like a tacked-on extra, but it's actually more suited to the date than track 9; and besides, who knows, zorn the shocker may get quite a kick out of being able to air some of his more exotic and twisted fantasies in the open, without most people realising what they're being shown..!)

11. "raksasa" - and finally, a magic carpet to whisk us away from the kingdom of dreams, a whirling ride through starlit heavens which allows ribot some final flights, and which melds many of the individual threads from the album: hurtling forward motion, the simple yet evocative access keys, even the return of the screams - though this time they are whooping dervish cries of the transported self. the guitar soars on the floating thermals of the keys and vibes, and carries us away.

what a memorable way to close this album, to ensure that the traveller is tempted to return..? and if we do return, we may find that even that gentle dream of the sunset beach is not quite as vanilla-smooth as was first thought: there is a little undertone of wistful sadness, just the ghost of a double edge. one cannot unlearn the knowledge of human weakness and evil; yet this bitter truth need not prevent us from enjoying the many beautiful experiences this vale of tears yet has to show.

* * *

well, fellow jazzers, i don't reckon there was very much *jazz* in that album at all, but you know what, i really feel as if i've learned some very valuable things from that experience, from that set of journeys.

from a "purely" musical perspective: the point is, the simplicity of the pieces belies the extraordinary degree of precision in setting them up in the first place. again, call it production or arrangement rather than composition (if you must), but it remains *shaping of sound* and it's masterly.

the *other* point is that nothing on this date sounds phoned in or cranked out by the yard - everyone is up for it, trying their best to make this ***as good as it can be...*** and this, in turn, is a level of devotion which zorn routinely inspires in his players, just like braxton.

yeah, that's right, those are the reasons why i always end up coming back to this man's albums, and why i've played this one however many times already, with more to come... thanks, mr zorn!

cent x

suggested further research:

1. naked city - *radio* (often unfairly dismissed as being the most like the early "cut-up" albums among the later work, which was generally more experimental... i have gone back to this album at regular intervals over the last fifteen years, there is a lot of material in it)
2. for sax playing: any solo dates or duos, or anything in a free improv setting; *yankees* (with derek bailey and george lewis) would be a good start; recent duets with milford graves are astonishing
3. for sax playing plus composition: the masada quartet albums (i have heard all ten studio vols and maintain they are all good, none just tossed off, not by any means)
4. for sax playing plus extreme textures/dynamics (hard hat required): pain killer
5. for generosity in writing for groups not featuring him: *moonchild* and *astronome* (mike patton/trevor dunn/baron) - as well as *six litanies for heliogabalus*, some of which does feature z's sax ... these recordings are influenced by ruins, fantômas, zenî geva etc etc and are personal favourites of mine
6. lots of other stuff!! take advantage of the fact that zorn makes no effort to prevent his music being shared on the net, and check some stuff out you haven't heard before... never know, you might like it and if not, try something else, it'll be different..! **buying** is always a good option too, the packaging is always sumptuous so one's aesthetic sensibilities are fully indulged. (that's pretty much guaranteed.)

finally, two recommendations picking up from the text:

frank zappa - *zoot allures* (1976)
gorillaz - *demon days* (2005)

(both exceptional examples of attention to fine detail in the presentation, selection and deployment of sounds - and within "vulgar" or low-brow idioms in both cases)

“Staying open to possibilities”: An interview with Hugh Hopper

Bass-player and composer Hugh Hopper was one of the key members of the so-called ‘Canterbury Scene’: a loose, and disparate set of musicians who made up some of the leading prog-rock bands in the 1960s and 70s, such as Caravan, Gong, and the group in which Hopper was the bassist, Soft Machine. As well as appearing on some of the Softs’ best known recordings, and in subsequent off-shoots such as Soft Machine Legacy, he played with the likes of Syd Barrett and Elton Dean, and has also been active in improvised and experimental music, often incorporating electronic textures into his work. In February 2008, he played a concert with the Delta Saxophone Quartet and drummer Simon at Kettle’s Yard in Cambridge, and we took the opportunity to interview him about his career and his current musical activities.

Interviewers – David Grundy/ Noa Corcoran-Tadd.



Hugh Hopper playing at Kettle’s Yard, Cambridge in 2008

DG: *Perhaps we could begin at the beginning: how you started out, your early influences and musical experiences.*

HH: My parents were the usual middle-of-the-road classical: they both played piano, but just at home, as people did in those days. I was really influenced a lot by my brother, who was two years older than me. He started playing clarinet and then got into playing guitar, so I took up the bass, and a lot of my influence is from my brother, because, being two years ahead, he heard things earlier than I did, and then I picked up on those.

So early days was rhythm and blues – Chuck Berry and stuff like that. And then I got involved in jazz, through Robert Wyatt and David Aellen. Really those have been the two threads of my life – rhythmic stuff and freer stuff as well, and also some modern classical and contemporary stuff.

DG: *What kind of modern classical?*

HH: Well, my brother exposed me to anything from Hindemith and Bartok to some of the more freaky stuff – Stockhausen and some of the more early electronic music.

NCT: *Which was really just emerging at that time...*

HH: Yeah, and of course it was really laborious in those days – you couldn't do it on a laptop. Nowadays Stockhausen could do in half an hour what it took him six months to construct from tapes.

DG: *That's get us onto compute technology I read that you and so on at the age of 13*

HH: No, that's a bit early, I would say a bit later than that. I got into loops and stuff when I was about 18, through David Aellen. I was living with him in Paris and he'd been working with Terry Riley and people who were working with the French Radiophonic workshop. So I learned a lot of that kind of stuff – soundscapes, loops, that kind of hypnotic stuff – from him. That was another important thread in my musical influences.

NCT: *David Aellen was also involved with some of the work of William S Burroughs. What was that relationship?*

HH: Well, David met Burroughs and we were involved in playing some shows, like the ICA in London, where he was doing a reading and I was playing with David and Robert Wyatt. I think David knew Burroughs really from Paris and we were just interested in that whole flow of things – the cut-up idea of Burroughs. I was 18 years old and that was a very important time for me, being surrounded by Beat poetry and the cut-up idea – completely different ideas of writing. I haven't read a Burroughs book now for thirty years, but at the time it was really a strong thing, and David had actually worked with Burroughs – he used his voice, and that of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and some of the other Beat Poets, on some of his soundscapes.

NCT: *And he was influential enough for you to name the band The Soft Machine [after Burroughs' novel].*

HH: In fact, before I was in the band, they went through several names, and then somebody thought of Soft Machine. David spoke to Burroughs and asked if that was OK and he said 'ah, I guess it's OK' – he didn't really care either way.

DG: *Well that bring us up to the beginnings of Soft Machine – maybe you could talk a bit about the Wilde Flowers?*

HH: Yeah, Wilde Flowers was our first semi-pro band in Canterbury. Like all semi-pro bands, we played about two gigs in our first year, and there was more hope involved than actual gigs, but we rehearsed a lot, as you do when you start a band. That was really the foundation of Soft Machine, Caravan, and Gong – those three bands started from the people who were in the Wilde Flowers. We started off trying to be creative, playing all sorts of new stuff - we all listened to Indian music and jazz – and it was a mixture of that with some things like the Stones and the Kinks. Eventually what happened was that it became smoother and smoother, and became a soul band and lost its creativity, but by then people had left and it carried on without the originals.

NCT: *There seems to have been a really interesting trajectory, if you look at all the Soft Machine albums, partly because of these creative tensions.*

HH: Yeah, every album was different, depending on who was in the band. I think for just about every album there was a personnel change – at least one person had left. The first one was psychedelic songs. Really, there's an album missing, because there should be an album with David Aellen, Kevin Ayers, Robert [Wyatt] and Mike Ratledge, but David had already left the band before the first main album was made in the States, so it was just a trio. Kevin Ayers wanted to be a poet and songwriter more than a musician; he got lumbered with playing the bass because nobody else would do it. After Kevin left, I joined, and Mike Ratledge, the keyboard player, became much more influential in the music – it was a lot jazzier and less psychedelic and folky. That was the way it flowed really – it became more and more jazzy with each album, and finally became a jazz-rock thing.

NCT: *By 'Third' and 'Fourth'?*

HH: Well, there was still a bit of the earlier spirit [on those two albums]. 'Fifth' was a weird one because it was very black – it had a black cover and it was a very dark record – and by 'Sixth' Elton Dean had left and Karl Jenkins was introducing more jazz-rock things. That was the last one I was on, and after that it became more of a Karl Jenkins thing.

NCT: *Whether you intended it or not, 'Third' is the most popular Soft Machine album.*

HH: Yeah, it's the one everybody always mentions. When we recorded it, it was right at the height of when we were really playing a lot of concerts, doing a lot of gigs, touring everywhere. For the actual sound of it, it's not that well produced – the stuff I've been

doing since then has been much better produced. But, what it can say, it's just one of those things, it's a classic thing. When I'm in Germany, guys still come up to me and say 'this record changed my life' – it happens every time, which is great.



Part of the inside cover art for 'Third': Elton Dean on the left and Hopper on the right.

DG: *What would you say is your favourite of all the Soft Machine albums?*

HH: I like bits of some of them. I like 'Third', obviously, and 'Fourth' – there's some good stuff on 'Fourth' – different things, I don't often listen to them. What I prefer really is listening to some of the live things which come out much later, because the studio records... They're OK, they're interesting, but they don't have the real spirit of the band as it was live, because it was real hooligan band, it wasn't a quiet, polite band on stage. Sometimes I listen back to some of the tapes – terrible sound, but the energy is fantastic. There's this idea that it was a cerebral band, but it wasn't that all – we used to play through Marshall stacks on eleven, basically. We had earplugs, and everyone was deaf by

the end – I still have tinnitus now. So yeah, I was glad when, in about the 80s, some of these archive records, the live ones, started to come out, even as bootlegs, which didn't have good enough sound; it was nice to hear what the actual energy of the band was like.



**Left to Right: Robert Wyatt,
Hugh Hopper, and Mike Ratledge**

DG: *There's this whole generic crossover thing we've touched on a bit earlier; I was interested in the fact that you played the Royal Albert Hall, at the Proms. It's hard to imagine something like that happening now – musicians associated with rock performing in a setting associated with the mainstream classical sphere.*

HH: It was one of the late night concerts after the main prom, and it was actually a concert of Tim Souster, who was a classical composer and knew Mike Ratledge, so he invited us to play as well. Before we played there was a whole piece with, I think, five pianos playing Steve Reich. So it wasn't the real mainstream prom, it was a late night one, but it is still quite rare.

DG: *Do you think people were more open to that sort of thing at the time?*

HH: Yeah, well people were more open to having a band like Soft Machine playing anywhere – we played in all the big halls several times. We played...I mean, you name it - Manchester, Leeds Town Hall – you couldn't do that now, people just aren't interested. So, yeah, it was a different atmosphere in those days.

DG: *Also, as well as the relationship that Soft Machine had with classical music, there was quite a strong relationship with jazz.*

HH: Yeah, well it was because we were interested in all those things, Mike Ratledge in particular. He didn't come up through rock groups, he learned to play classical piano and then became interested in jazz later. He wasn't a guy who'd learned through being in a pop or rock or blues band – he didn't know anything about that, it wasn't part of his life at all. So we had all those influences and that's the stuff we wanted to listen to – things like John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman.

DG: *And this was part of a wider trend.*

HH: There was a great crossover then: before that you were either a jazzier or you were a rocker and that was it, but in about 1969/70, there really was a possibility, people were putting on gigs that mixed things – it could be ethnic music or classical music or whatever, mixed – there were all kinds of experiments.

DG: *So the 60s was the time when it opened up.*

HH: Yeah, from 66/67 onwards – that was the time when things seemed possible.

DG: *Do you think there was any specific reason for that?*

HH: It was the time – politically things were changing, there was a lot more freedom, and suddenly you're allowed to do things which before people hadn't thought of doing. There was a feeling of liberty.

DG: *Moving on to prog-rock itself – do you think there was anything specifically English about it? I'm thinking of that very whimsical strain...*

HH: Yeah, you can't imagine many American bands sounding like that. Americans tend to be much harder, and probably play better, but not so whimsical and not so creative, in a sense. I think that's right, it is a very English thing.

NCT: *As you were saying, you started off in R & B and stuff like that. I was curious - who really influenced you as a bass player; who did you listen to?*

HH: Strangely enough, I've been more influenced by acoustic jazz players than electric players. Because I listened to all of those earlier things – rhythm and blues things, Fats Domino, Little Richard, James Brown and his bass players – it's all in there. But when I think about it, the people I would actually name are all jazz bass players – Charles Mingus, Ron Carter, people like that.

NCT: *How has being a bassist influenced your compositional approach?*

HH: It's hard to say, because they're both part of the same thing. The bass is important to me – when I hear music, I couldn't really imagine writing much music without writing something for the bass at the bottom of it. And also I see my role as a bass player not as a flashy soloist, and for me that's important, to actually be 'the bass player'.

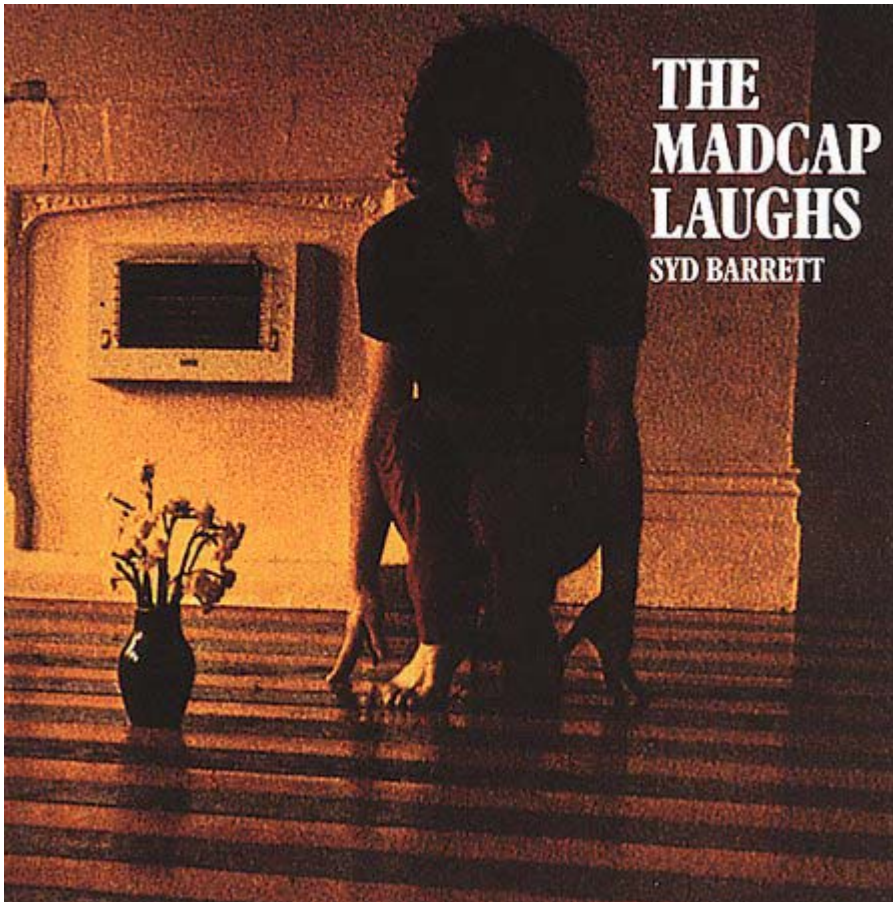
NCT: *How in terms of how your compositions might have differed from those of someone like Mike Ratledge, or Elton Dean?*

HH: Well, they're simpler, for a start: I haven't got that kind of technical facility on the instrument. Of course, now, on a computer, you can write anything you like, at any speed you care to name. But yeah, it has been important.

DG: *I wanted to ask about Syd Barrett particularly, because you played on a couple of tracks on his album 'The Madcap Laughs', and because, despite only being there at the beginning, he was such a pivotal, influential figure. What was your experience of him?*

HH: I didn't know him very well. Because Soft Machine and Pink Floyd started when they did – '66, '67 – they were playing a lot of the same gigs, at the Roundhouse in

London, and the U.F.O, so they were quite friendly: they were kind of rivals but it was a friendly rivalry. I came in later, so I didn't know him that well, but he came along to a gig we were doing in London in '69, and saw us afterwards and said, 'I'm doing a record at Abbey Road, do you want to come and play on the record?' So we went along, and he'd got the guitar and voice tracks down already. Of course he was very erratic, so it's not 4 bars, 4 bars, it's one and half, two –whoops – start off in another key! We're sitting there trying to learn this in the studio in Abbey Road, and we're still working on it when Syd pokes his head round the door and says, 'thanks, fine, that's it', and we were still learning it, but he was happy...He was very chaotic, and even then he was drifting a bit. It was a nice record, it couldn't be anyone else – he had his own total planet.



DG: *What do you think of this whole idea of the 'Canterbury Scene'?*

HH: Well, it's a journalistic thing. In fact, there was nothing much going on; we couldn't wait to leave Canterbury and move to London and have a real career. But it's a useful label – I use it myself. But ask different people what it means and it means completely different things. For me it means people like Caravan, Soft Machine and Gong, but then they're very different anyway: Caravan is songs and Soft Machine became much more jazzy, so what does it mean? It's a useful label, it's a journalistic label, which was applied after the event – Ian McDonald, of NME, actually thought of the label in about 1971, well after it had all happened.

DG: *Someone else I wanted to ask about was Elton Dean: obviously a very important figure but not that well known outside of particular circles.*

HH: He was a great jazz player, he really was. His real love was free jazz – he would have been perfectly happy freely improvising all his life, but he wrote some great tunes as well and was a great player in Soft Machine, In Cahoots, lots of bands – he did a lot of stuff with Keith Tippett. He lived the real jazz life, he drank and he smoke and he died as you do if you drink too much, but he lived it to the full, he was totally committed. And he was a good mate of mine – I was in lots of projects and did lots of tours with him. It wasn't a surprise when he died, because for the last ten years of his life he was on that path, but I'm happy to have played with him.

DG: *Thinking about free improv – we were talking with Mike Westbrook about free improv and how it relates to other genres. So, players you'd think of as, say, a straight-ahead jazz player or something, could play free improv as well, but a divide had opened up that wasn't there before – people had gone off into camps and so you had the free improv players...*

HH: I think that was always there, to be honest. There's always been a lot of snobbery within the jazz world, as there is in every other musical genre. Elton could do both things, he was a natural player, a very natural musician.

DG: *Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about 'Numero D' Vol' [Hopper's recent recording, from 2007, with saxophonist Simon Picard and others].*

HH: I was down in London with a guitarist called Mark Hewins. I was immediately knocked out by his sound, his melodicism, and I thought it would be nice to invite Simon [Picard] down to Canterbury to record, and the same with the other players. I've played with Charles Hayward in a couple of things, and Steve Franklin with In Cahoots. I just had the idea to get together with a group of players. It was completely improvised and cleaned up a bit later – we chose the best bits.

DG: *The project with the Delta Saxophone Quartet, how did that come about?*

HH: They weren't particularly into Soft Machine, but I had a book of sheet music, of some of my tunes from Soft Machine, which was published in 1970, and somebody gave it to Pete Whyman, the alto player, and he just started playing with it. Then they farmed it out to arrangers to arrange these pieces, not necessarily from the music, but just that they had the idea of Soft Machine, so some of the music was very close to the originals and some of the pieces are completely re-interpreted. When they were near to recording they asked me if I'd like to play on one track, and since then we've done a couple of gigs and the album's come out [['Dedicated To You...But You Weren't Listening' (Moonjune, 2007)]. What's amazing is that they're not blasé jazz musicians – they love music, they love playing it, it's a real pleasure being with them. They're keen for me to play with them – it's nice. It's just one track on the record', but now we've worked on three or four new pieces – well, old Soft Machine pieces, but reworked.

DG: *Are there any other plans for the future? Any projects?*

HH: Lots, yeah. Yumi Hara, the Japanese piano player – I've done one gig with her, completely improvised, and there's a tour of Japan in June. There's also Clearframe, another improvised thing with Charles Hayward, Orphy Robinson and Lol Coxhill. I do this thing called Brainville with David Aellen and Chris Cutler; we played a few gigs last year, and we're playing in Italy this year. And there's also Soft Machine Legacy, which is ex-members of Soft Machine. So there's four or five different things going on. It's always up and down – I never know what I'm going to do in a years' time, but I like to stay open to possibilities.



Hugh Hopper playing at the Downtown Music Gallery in 2008

An interview with Alexander Hawkins



*You may have glimpsed this man's name over the past few months: Oxford-based pianist Alexander Hawkins is starting to get the attention he deserves. A technically gifted, immensely knowledgeable, and extremely inventive performer in both freely improvised and more jazz-based contexts, he has recently appeared on two albums, 'Barkingside', by the group of the same name, which features Alex Ward, and 'The Convergence Quartet', which documents a collaboration between two British musicians (himself and bassist Dominic Lash) and American/Canadian guests Taylor Ho Bynum and Harris Eisenstadt. In May 2008, Hawkins was touring with his newly-formed Ensemble, a group with an intriguing line-up that features little-known guitarist Otto Fischer alongside Orphy Robinson of Jazz Warriors fame, improvising stalwarts Hannah Marshall and Dominic Lash, and young Spanish percussionist Javier Carmona. They stopped by in Cambridge (where Hawkins' student studies occurred), and I took the opportunity to talk to him about his own career, and to hear some of his opinions on what he refers to as 'the music'. **Interviewer - David Grundy***

DG: *Perhaps we could start off by talking about how you began in music, your early musical experiences, how you got to where you are today, basically.*

AH: I had my first piano lessons at the age of six, I think; there was always music on at home, so I was always around this music. My dad has always been heavily into jazz; he did a PhD, a year of which was at Columbia, so he was in New York in the late 60s, when there was obviously a lot of stuff going on. He also did an undergraduate degree at Birmingham, and he was there in the early 60s, when the Ellington band would come through quite frequently; he also saw Coltrane and Dolphy. So, there was always music on at home - the first musical thing I can remember is the Ellington tune 'Saturday Night Function.' The stuff that's burned in my memory is early Ellington; the first 20 years of Ellington are what I've grown up with since the year dot.

He also had a lot of classical music on, so I was also listening to that, though I think as a kid the jazz is easier to relate to, because you can skip round the room to it! When I went to school I was lucky, being in Oxford, which is obviously a big musical town; my first piano teacher was a guy called Roger Allen, who's a big Wagner scholar. My first lesson was in how to read rhythm, and it involved a totally implausible feat. He had the score to *Die Meistersinger* there, open at the Prize song, where Hans Sachs is hitting the anvil while Beckmesser is trying to sing, and I had to clap the anvil part - he was score-reading the thing!

So my formal training was all classical. I'd always had piano lessons, but then, at the age of about 13, I started playing the organ, which became my first study instrument really, and from 13 to 18 I played a lot of organ music. At 18, one day, I just never played

the organ again. I'd made a decision: I'd figured out that I really, really liked classical music, and in some cases I loved it, but jazz was the music I really wanted to do. So I thought: if I'm going to play this, I need to know the music inside out, so I can't play organ, I'm not going to play organ, I'm just going to get my piano stuff back. I was always playing piano, but not very well; I was actually quite obsessive-compulsive about practising the organ, so all my chops were on the organ, and I thought, right I've got to start playing the piano properly.

On leaving school at 18, I came to Cambridge: my degree's actually a law degree – I was at Caius and I did law – and then I stayed at Cambridge for six years because I did a PhD straight after I did my undergrad degree – the PhD was in criminology. Now all this time the Cambridge music scene was really pretty bad for the type of music I was interested in – it's a big folk town, and obviously there's a lot of choral music happening, but when it came to straight-ahead jazz and more 'out' music, there was not a lot happening at all. So I spent I don't know how many hours in these garages under Harvey Court where they store old carpets (which is quite a nice smell if you're going to practise for hours a day!), and they had these upright pianos there. So I would just practise my own stuff; and it was a time where I was quite obsessive-compulsive about practising – I would have patterns and things I would practice, and if I didn't get them right I would have to go back and do them again three times, and heaven forbid I didn't get them right those times, because then it was nine! So I spent most of my time in Cambridge actually just doing my own thing – I still played straight-ahead jazz gigs, I had friends in London and Oxford, so I was doing that, but not so much. Towards the end of my PhD I was beginning to play more, and then I suppose it was really when I began to spend more time back in Oxford, after finishing in Cambridge, that I began to meet more people on the improvised music scene and the jazz scene, and play out a bit more, with a bit more intent, as it were.

The Oxford scene is a fantastic one to grow up in: there's a great collective there, the Oxford Improvisers' Collective, with some fantastic musicians like Dom Lash, Pat Thomas, and Pete McPhail. Pete and I just made a record last year, which isn't out yet. He's kind of been off the scene for a few years now, but when it comes to alto players in this country, there's Pete and there's the rest – well, there's some great players actually, like Trevor Watts, but Pete is really something special. So it was only when I moved back to Oxford that I really started to be able to take things more seriously.

I met Alex Ward at a fairly early stage in playing – we actually did a concert in the West Road Concert Hall [in Cambridge], with Alex and Steve Waterman, bizarrely; I'd done some stuff with Steve Waterman in a big band context, and Steve's a great player – he's got that Kenny Wheeler thing down totally, so it was a nice front line. So we did that thing, and I got to know Alex there. He was a very inspiring guy, because, even if you don't understand the music, he's such an alarmingly good musician that, whether you like what he's doing or not, you can't help but respect it, and, in a very quiet way, he was very influential – he's very big on doing the music you want to do and the music you believe in and the music you know. I first talked to him about this when he sent me a bio for the gig we did at West Road: it was two pages long and he said, "you're going to have to edit this, but I always think that it's better to be verbose than misunderstood." It was clear from this that he was serious and purposeful. So that really helps you at an early stage, getting into a horribly marginalized music.



DG: *Someone with so much experience: how old was he when he was playing with Derek Bailey?*

It was certainly in his very early teens. There's a duo record with Steve Noble called 'Ya Boo, Reel and Rumble' on Incus, which suggests that he knew Derek by then – I think he was only 15 when he made that. There's also a record called 'Legend of

the Blood Yeti' from when he was perhaps only a year or two older, which has Derek on one side and Thurston Moore on the other, and it's just frightening what a developed musical conception he has at that age. In this music we all have this romanticized thing about, you know, you're expressing yourself and your experiences, and then you listen to him and you think – there's only about 15 years of experience there, even if he was conscious for the first four of them!

So that was the beginnings of stuff. I suppose the fundamental love of the music came from what was on at home, which was early Ellington and Tatum. We had this tape of a radio show on Tatum and it was mind-blowing, frightening as well for a young piano player: nowadays, if I read one of those reviews saying it sounds like there's six hands playing it, I think 'oh yeah, it's probably just some guy with loads of chops', but then, listening to Tatum at that age, you actually believe how people could misunderstand this for somebody playing with four hands – just incredible.

DG: *I guess that brings us on to specific piano-playing influences: obviously there's Tatum, which would be in the jazz direction, but, in terms of the avant-garde side of things, I guess there would be Cecil Taylor...*

AH: I guess. I mean I came at the avant-garde piano players through...the first really out music I remember hearing was Dolphy – Dad had this compilation of Dolphy stuff. I got Dolphy straight away, because I'd listened obsessively to Charlie Parker. There's a great bootleg of Charlie Parker, which is badly recorded, so you've got drums and you've got Parker, and, when you can't hear the piano and you can't hear the bass, suddenly you realize how free he's playing. I could play it to someone who knows the music really well, and they might say Jimmy Lyons, they might say Dolphy, they might even say Ornette –the point is that it was so free...So I got Dolphy quite early. And the thing with Dolphy is, something that people haven't really talked about much is the connection with Tatum – there's so much harmonically that I think is going on there.

So, Dolphy and then Coltrane, and then, I suppose, Cecil Taylor. Because I was into the early stuff as well, I've always been checking out the whole canon – so I was listening to Earl Hines, and if you're listening to Earl Hines you check out Jaki Byard, and if you check out Jaki Byard you listen to Mingus, and if you listen to Mingus you check out Don Pullen, and right there you've got a still criminally underrated player who's unbelievable in what he's doing.

DG: *He's mixing the more traditional things with more modern things...almost like a history of jazz piano.*

AH: Absolutely, like Jaki Byard – and the thing about it is, it's not pastiche, he has all these styles down and they're all happening from 'within' him.

So, Don Pullen and Cecil Taylor were the first of the really free piano players I was listening to. I guess you never finish listening to Cecil Taylor – there's so much of his stuff that I don't know, and I still love that music. And then – I can't remember exactly how I got into the AACM musicians – I think *Sound*, by Roscoe Mitchell, was the first record that I had from those guys, and Muhal Richard Abrams is just an extraordinary player, again, inexplicably underrated. I think the thing with Cecil Taylor is that his is just such a vast conception that you have to be very careful not to get totally eaten up by it. If you're trying to get your own thing, and Cecil's the only 'out' piano player you're listening to, then what can you do? You can ape him, in which case you fail, because, first of all, you're not being original, and second of all, no-one's got his way round the instrument. So I was listening to Muhal a lot, because he has a very different conception.

Also, staying in Chicago, Sun Ra is a fantastic piano player. I know some people don't like the solo piano records, but I just don't understand that. Again, he's another guy who's got the whole tradition down, who can play [*Take the*] *A Train* and play it totally out, or play stride on it, or just play an old blues.

So that was one end of the listening, the free piano players. Of course, there's many more that I love – at the moment, Bobby Few – jeez, he's unbelievable! The stuff he does with Frank Wright, the Centre of the World quartet, obviously the stuff with Steve Lacy and with Noah Howard....And then Marilyn Crispell in the Braxton Quartets is phenomenal – and I think that, especially with the earlier stuff, she's an example of somebody who's really got a conception indebted to Cecil Taylor's, but with her own thing as well. She's really walking that line – there's a record called *Live in Berlin*, from 1984, with Billy Bang, [Peter] Kowald and John Betsch, and there's a piece dedicated to Braxton, but the biggest influence is really Cecil Taylor. It's amazing because she's hewing very closely to that conception but still manages to do her own thing – that's an extraordinary record.

And one guy who doesn't get talked about nearly enough, but who really needs to be talked about in the same bracket as Monk and Bud Powell, is Elmo Hope. A wonderful pianist and a great composer, but he gets short-changed because the description will always say 'Elmo Hope's style falls somewhere between that of his boyhood friends, Bud Powell and Thelonious Monk' – you can see what it's saying, but it totally sells him short.

And from Elmo Hope you listen to Herbie Nichols and then to Hassan – there's a

Max Roach trio record with a pianist called Hasaan Ibn Ali, which is his only surviving performance – he had at least one record which was destroyed in the Atlantic Warehouse fire in the 70s, a quartet with Odean Pope. This Max Roach record has Hasaan and Art Davis on bass. If Elmo Hope suffered from being in between Monk and Bud Powell, this is halfway between Monk and Cecil Taylor!

So there's this amazing heritage of piano players that people just don't talk about any more – go to a music college in this country and people will be talking about Bill Evans, Chick Corea, Keith Jarrett, Herbie Hancock. There are these guys who treat this piano in this certain way – it's a tradition that I guess has been carried on by certain players in the U.S., like Jason Moran – the percussive thing. But it's not very fashionable in jazz education now – it's very much about this post-Bill Evans thing.

DG: *Yeah, and a strong classical influence too – I heard Tom Cawley's Curios supporting Wayne Shorter the other week and it seems to be very much the in-vogue style.*

AH: Yeah, it is. Personally, I just don't go for it. Maybe it's just the space I've been in for the past few years, and it just doesn't appeal to me – I guess we'd all be very boring if we all liked the same thing. There are some really beautiful players in that style – don't get me wrong, I love Bill Evans. But if I want to hear someone do Bill Evans, I'm going to listen to Bill Evans. Of course, the dogma follows through the free piano line as well – there's any number of guys who just unthinkingly clench their fists and they're Cecil Taylor. But there's something particularly pernicious about the way the music schools are teaching people prescriptively which notes to play – this whole Lydian chromatic based thing – and it lends itself very well to that post-Bill Evans style. It's just not something I go for.

Returning to influences – of course, I've just been talking about American players so far: in this country there's Veryan Weston. I spent the day with him a couple of months ago, and it was so inspiring you wouldn't believe – he was showing me all this stuff. Some of it went in, in a literal sense – I learnt these rhythmic patterns from him – but it's more about just being around someone with such a conception like that.

But the most important player to me in this country is Pat Thomas – you just don't hear him play piano in this country, there are just so few instruments, though he plays it a lot in Europe. It's an overused word, but he's a real genius – he can do things with standards that are mind-blowing. I have this recording that he taped at a concert in Newcastle, in an improvised music context – him, Ernst Reijseger, Hamid Drake, Gail Brand and Roy Campbell – and it's just the greatest piano-playing I've heard in so long. He's just a real master, and to be around him in Oxford, and to learn from watching him...I've played duo stuff with him as well, and got totally whupped by him, but you learn so much in the process, and he has a way of making you sound good! He's a real master, and you don't hear him play piano enough, which is a real shame...

DG: *How would you say you negotiate those influences in forming your own style? Obviously you already have your own style already – how do you go about doing that – do you deliberately aim to come up with a new concept?*

AH: I don't think it's a conscious process, developing your concept. I think in some ways you can't let it be, if it's going to be sincere – you just have to play and see

what happens. Maybe it's got something to do with the way I practice – I never transcribe anything, but I'll sit down and try and figure out the sounds that people are using. I hear some texture that I like in Sun Ra and try and work out some pedaling thing that he's using – so for five minutes you're sitting there and thinking 'I'm going to be Sun Ra, I'm going to sound like Sun Ra here.' Likewise, with Cecil, there are certain technical things which totally baffle me, until I see him play – I think seeing him is the way to understand how he does what he does. The technical things he does at the piano are intimately linked to how he moves at the keyboard – so I'll try to find out how he does these ridiculously fast runs, or how he voices something. One of the things with him is that he's so tonal, in many respects – so you'll hear this voicing and try and work out what it is.

And what I take from Muhal and Pat [Thomas] is this thing of how the old styles, the styles that you love to listen to, can be relevant to the new style – I suppose with the AACM it's the explicit 'ancient to the future' concept. So I'll hear this fractured stride that Muhal's playing, and try to integrate things like that, because, especially with improv or 'out' music, we can worry too much about being self-consciously 'new', and not worry enough about making nice sounds and playing the music that we love. So it fascinates me how Muhal is dealing with, say, the Chicago tradition of Earl Hines, and how he has this serious Bud Powell thing – his single-line work is straight out of Bud Powell, and this shows you how it can be relevant a non-tonal context.

But in terms of consciously how you formulate those into a style, I don't think you do it consciously, and on those ill-advised occasions when I *have* thought in a performance, 'well, I'm going to do my Monk thing or my Cecil Taylor thing,' it just hasn't worked – unless you're in some zany, hyper-referential context, where everyone's messing around and you can think 'right, well now I'm going to play some ragtime.' That's different because then you can just get your head down and play really hard and pretend to be James P. Johnson. But unless you're in that hyper-referential style, it has to be unconscious. I guess that's one of the mysteries of how you develop a personal style – I don't know how it happens. Of course part of it is a mechanical thing at the keyboard – you need to be able to execute your ideas, you need to be able to play what you're hearing. But even that's a kind of circular thing, as you probably don't hear too many things you can't play, although there are obviously exceptions to that: I can hear a million Cecil Taylor licks that I can't even dream about playing! So, I think it's an unconscious thing, forging your style, and it's always developing as well – you're always trying to learn. You to learn from the different contexts you play: this learning on-the-job kind of thing. During a performance, especially if it's with people you haven't played with before, you learn a lot about your style by seeing how it fits in the different relief which other groups set it in.

DG: *You still play in a fair amount of different contexts: you've got the improv work, which is your main thing, and you've got the new Ensemble, which is perhaps more of a jazz kind of thing, and then you've got more mainstream jazz work as well.*

AH: Sure. This is the music I'm most comfortable with and the music I want to make, so it tends to be that the improv settings I'm in are loosely free jazz settings. I play in this group, Barkingside, with Alex Ward, which really tends towards what we think of as English improv, but most of the settings I'm in are, I guess, leaning towards free jazz.

It's different with the Ensemble because it's more compositional, but I'm not really approaching things differently to how I approach totally free improv. It can be a more intuitive ride, because my default style fits more comfortably into this, so I can switch off and get into that thing we've all had, where you're playing and you can either have this super-concentrated thing where you're playing and thinking, 'yeah, this is something, I'm going at this and this is nice', or you've got that stage one above it where you're thinking about what you had for breakfast, or what you're going to do after the gig, and something in the back of your mind's telling you, 'yeah, the music's happening tonight.' I suppose I'm more likely to get into that space if I'm in a free jazz context, even though I'm not thinking terribly differently to when I play with, say, Alex Ward, or in a setting like that.

Now of course there are different considerations to take into account in this kind of setting I'm in with the Ensemble, which is more to do with following through a horizontal conception, following through an idea which might be totally unrelated to what someone else is doing, because you've set them off on a different path and you're on a parallel path – it's like windows on the opposite side of the street, that sort of thing. That's less of an approach, I think, that improv bands take, where it tends to be more knotty and vertical in terms of that kind of engagement.

DG: *I suppose we could talk a bit more about some of the specifics of your style. I've been listening to some of your solo playing, which hasn't been officially released – these are just some short solo recordings, and they seem seems very rhythmically based. There are lots of pauses in, shifts of tempo; you'll be going in one direction, then you'll stop, seem to check yourself, almost, then move off in another direction – and I wondered if that was a conscious ploy you'd developed to keep yourself on your toes, so that you didn't settle into familiar patterns.*

AH: Yeah, I think a part of it is conscious. I had this batch of tracks that I'd recorded, and I really liked some of them, and others I wasn't sure about. They were good but, for all improvisers, the solo is a special case – there's no information which comes other than from you, except insofar as you might use the acoustic, or there might be some extraneous noise in the studio or whatever. So it's a very difficult thing, and I'm still working at it really.

The pauses – where you're struggling, not in the small-scale, but where you're struggling to develop something, that's when you're most prone to fall into patterns and familiar things, so with those tracks, if I found myself going into one of those things that I knew as one of my things, as it were, I would stop and turn round. The rhythm thing – the more I play, rhythm is just more and more important to me – I know that some people dealing with the perception of music, and with the perception of human communication in general, argue that rhythm is the fundamental aspect of our communication. I don't know if that's true, but I think that, as musicians, we all recognize that rhythm has this fundamental importance which, certainly for me, harmony doesn't have, and melody needn't necessarily have. But rhythm is – I mean if I'm listening to somebody play non-rhythmically, or out-of-tempo, I think to myself, 'ah, they're playing out-of-tempo' – in other words, I think of it in relation to what a tempo would be. Now that doesn't mean playing metrically, it doesn't mean playing grooves, but it means having some concept of flow – just like with the early free jazz drummers. You listen to Sunny Murray, and it's

intensely rhythmic – you can't count it – or maybe you can, maybe if you're a drummer you can count it, and maybe if you've got a brain like a supercomputer you can count Milford Graves – but it's this concept of momentum and flow.

Now, that's rhythm in a general, fundamental sense, and I also think that groove and metre are very important. I think there are these two conceptions of freedom which are at work with improvisers – one is the 'freedom from', which you might associate with old-school British improvising: no chord changes, no time, no soloing – anarchic in the literal sense.

DG: *And deliberately trying to find strategies to avoid playing anything – people like Derek Bailey, especially, trying to find ways to play something different in every performance.*

AH: Of course. The view which is always posited against that one – well, people argue against what Derek Bailey means by [the concept of 'non-idiomatic improvisation'] – but, the view which is posited against that is that that in itself is a dogma and a rule – if you say, going in to every performance, 'I'm not going to play changes, I'm not going to suggest any harmony, I'm not going to play any rhythm, I'm not going to solo, and we're all equal' – well that strikes me as slightly limiting.

Personally speaking, I find more in the concept that you're getting from, say, the AACM, which is not the 'freedom from' but the 'freedom to' – if you want to play totally zany, totally non-metrically, totally atonal, then, great, that's a choice. Another choice, to extend your freedom, is that you might choose to play referentially, you might play a groove, you might hover round some tonality, or you might quote 'West End Blues' – for me personally, I find that that gives more of a range of available expressions. Now I know that's not true for all players – some of the improv players who haven't come from jazz, or another music – I don't know how they would feel about that. Maybe they'd feel it's not in their arsenal to do these things, so, if we were to say, 'we might go into some ragtime,' or, 'let's play tonally', or something, that actually might be inhibiting. But just for me personally, I'm just very conscious of my own bounded rationality when someone says 'let's play really free.'

DG: *So saying 'let's play free', you feel, would actually limit you.*

AH: I feel that it can. There are exceptions... Well, the first thing to say is that there are complete masters who play in a totally free idiom. [Pause] I just called it an idiom! Not that that wasn't deliberate, I don't know... There are total masters who can do this – Evan Parker, Derek Bailey. You don't hear these people and think they're limited – 'why aren't they playing *Stella by Starlight*?' – so this is purely a personal thing, but I like material to work with. Maybe it's just that I don't trust my own invention enough, maybe I lack that degree of courage. There are some people who do it absolutely fantastically and I never have that sensation [of running out of ideas], say, if I'm playing with Alex Ward, never, because if I begin to flag I steal something from him – it's like having this huge conveyor belt of ideas and you can just take what you need.

DG: *But for solo playing, you would want to have some kind of framework.*

AH: Yes, I think so. I don't even know that I would know what it means to play totally free, solo. Conceptually, if you sat me down and said 'play me a totally free solo', I don't think it would come out. I might end up doing a 5-minute impression of what I might do if I were playing in an improv band, a 'music-minus-one' kind of thing, but solo, I find it very difficult to play totally freely, in the sense that free means 'no nothing'. Now if someone says to me 'play freely' and I interpret that as 'play what you want', well then I'm happy as Larry and that's fine. I think part of that is a difference between the British conception and the American jazz conception, and probably the European scene at large – I'm thinking of some of the Dutch players, or the Germans.

DG: *You were talking about the different international contexts there, and earlier when we were talking about your influences, you mentioned a lot of American players, a lot of British and continental players as well, but do you feel that coming from Britain it's given you a particular heritage, or do you feel that with records and so on you can have whatever heritage you want?*

AH: Yeah, it's an interesting one. Part of this goes back to the general version of the more particular question earlier about influences and how you negotiate them into a single style. I think part of it is that, so long as you're sincere in what you play at any one time, you sort of can't help it, so I don't feel self-conscious. I don't think, 'educated white boy plays jazz' – I don't have this hang-up, it's not a problem for me, because it's not relevant. I grew up – the music that I was listening to since I was knee-high to a grasshopper *was* the Ellington stuff – that *is* the music that I know and I love. Sure I know this music from records, and in terms of the music I've experienced live, it's a whole mix of things, and I am growing up and working in this British context, mostly. I suppose I could feel an odd-one-out, in that this non-idiomatic free improvisation is the dominant conception when we're talking about 'out' music – but I don't feel self-conscious about it, and I don't think it's an issue. I think we can be too cynical when you read interviews with people talking about jazzers as everyone's music, or all the music as everyone's music. Sure, I haven't grown up in the context of a lot of these musicians who are my heroes, and of course as a result I'm going to have a different take on things, but in terms of the music you love, so much of what you feel about music or art is something in your head and in your imagination – you love what you love, and I don't feel it's a problem there.

So I don't think we have a conscious national slant to what we're doing with the Ensemble. I guess there must be British sensibilities in what I'm doing – I'm probably more prone to dive inside the piano and make funny noises than an American piano player, I suppose. But I simply don't think of it in these national terms. I had a bit of this when I started playing. I was thinking, 'I've got to make new music, and the only thing to do is to play utterly anarchic, noisy free jazz' – this was when I didn't know about the improv side of things. That was a conscious thing, but then I started to think 'actually, I'm getting too hung up on making something that's new (missing the point that noisy free jazz was the best part of 40 years old itself!), and actually I want to make music that sounds nice; I want to make pleasing vibrations, not just be bloody-minded' – and as soon as I started doing that, then I suppose it just took its own course.

And in terms of how it manifests itself in this group we've got tonight: by passport, four of us are British, but we have Javier Carmona on drums, a Spaniard, and Otto [Fischer], who's half-Nigerian and spends a lot of time in Nigeria and a lot of time in New York. He has the Downtown sound, a Bill-Frisell-inflected thing often, but that's totally genuine for him – it would be more strange if he were to turn up and play like John Russell or Derek [Bailey], although he's got that language in the arsenal. And then Orphy [Robinson] came up with that generation of the Jazz Warriors– that is an indigenous music for Britain. Some of the early records – 'Out of Many One People' – that's an incredible record, it's a great record, and that is a British music, I think. Orphy comes straight from that – he's playing his own thing. And Dom Lash and Hannah Marshall are best known in the non-idiomatic context.

But again, it's probably a case of the listeners' perspective as well: when I first heard Hannah, I thought of Abdul Wadud, and somebody yesterday came up to me and said 'she's got that Ernst Reijseger thing completely down.' Now of course the long and short of it is that she's playing nothing but Hannah, she's doing her own thing, but the listener will hear different things depending on where they're coming from. Likewise, Dom is as happy playing ultra-minimalist stuff – composed pieces by Radu Malfatti, or improvised stuff with Mark Wastell – as he is playing almost a kind of classically-inflected thing with Phil Wachsmann; or if we do standards gigs he can turn on the Wilbur Ware. So I don't think of him as having a national bias when he's playing music – I just think that he's playing music, and our collective music happens to gravitate towards one area.

DG: *And of course, as you say, this group's got a cosmopolitan background in a way, and then you've got this American music you're playing.*

AH: Yeah, in terms of the compositions, for a start, it's just music that I love – I think compositionally they're just incredibly strong, and they do incredibly interesting things. If you take a slightly unlikely bunch of musicians and give them strong material, something's going to happen. So we have a few Braxton charts.

Again, it wasn't a conscious thing to choose music from the American tradition – it's just material that I thought the band would work well with, and probably slightly more than half of it's my own material anyway – and that's British material, I guess, so we cancel each other out! But, you know, Braxton, Sun Ra, I don't think of these as American composers, I just think of them as musicians offering information that we can work with.

DG: *There's a lot of rhetoric about this music that might emphasize the national side of things, particularly with American music – black classical music, a lot of the free jazz rhetoric of, say, Amiri Baraka, attacking Burton Greene for not playing the music properly because he's a white man, but once you get beyond that, it just is music, you're not worried about that.*

AH: No, that doesn't make me feel worried at all. I mean, you look at the groups now – look at the racial make-up of Braxton's groups, or their gender make-up. And, by the way, it's so context-specific historically – when you listen to 'Black Dada Nihilismus' on

the end of the New York Ark Quartet record, it's powerful stuff, but the thought never crosses your mind that it needs to be explained – and there's a white guy in the band, Roswell Rudd, anyway. So, amongst musicians, of course there's the odd thing, and jibes from Miles against various people, and against Burton Greene from Baraka, but you look at the make-up of these bands now...

DG: *You think it's gone beyond...*

AH: Yeah, because I think there are so many different angles on this music – of course there's the fact that essentially it is a black music, but it's still a music for everyone. Even if you read about say, the organ trio records, records made for a black audience in black clubs, I don't think the musicians in question would have any kind of problem with you or I enjoying these records. Because the information has come from a certain place doesn't mean that the information is only for a certain people, and the same goes for the other way. Imagine we're in a parallel universe: we're having this discussion in America, and you're saying to me 'so what about this white working-class guy from Yorkshire, why are you playing this fractured music?' – I mean, witness the critiques of Braxton in the 70s and late 60s, for 'whitening' his influences. He says he loves Paul Desmond and Warne Marsh and [Lennie] Tristano, and there are certain people on his back.

Of course the racial debate is still massively important in this music, and in this country, there's still issues with it with musicians, it's still important. But in terms of what music we can make these days, whereas it might have been contentious us playing Sun Ra thirty years ago, it didn't cross my mind this time, and I don't think it would cross anyone's mind. Now, of course, you thought of it, to ask the question, but, that's your job in this context.

Now, if we were to cover 'Black Dada Nihilismus' and I was to do the Amiri Baraka recitation, then things would be different and there would be this 'why are you doing that? How do you relate to this music?' But I think that's a qualitatively different thing to what we're doing.

DG: *And very much of it's time. Obviously Baraka's still doing his thing, he's still recording with William Parker, and also with Billy Harper I think, and obviously there are people who've been influenced by Baraka, but there aren't too many people with his extreme rhetoric.*

AH: Yeah, and I've never, even from older musicians who have come out of this world – one of William Parker's first records was 'Black Beings', the Frank Lowe record – I had this conversation with William Parker in between sets a few weeks ago, and we talked for half an hour and he was giving me encouragement and inspiration and advice, and the racial question just wasn't relevant. There was never any question, 'why don't you play your own music', because it's a global music like others now, and it's simply not an odd thing for me to be doing, it's not an odd thing for you and me to love this music now, whereas in the past it might have been contentious.

DG: *Although I suspect that with some of the free jazz there may been more white people*

[than black] in the audience anyway, what with the abstract, intellectual side of it. And then you get someone like Archie Shepp, or like [Albert] Ayler, who changes his style because he wants to reach a black audience.

AH: And to look at this question in depth – of course, the George Lewis AACM book [A Power Stronger than Itself] is going to be massively important in relation to this – we'd then have to think about the Chicagoans moving to Paris, and that so much of the documentation of this music has been on European labels – Black Saint, Soul Note, Hat Art and so forth – and we'd have to think about where these musicians make their livings nowadays – sure they play their club gigs in the states, but essentially they're making them in the European festivals and so forth. This question of how the worlds relate, we'd have to think about those things as well.

DG: *A debate for another day, perhaps.*

AH: Yeah, for another interview, or twenty. But I think that this George Lewis book will be really significant. He's already published some important essays dealing with Afrological and Eurological perspectives– there's a great essay called 'Gittin' to Know Y'all' about the Baden-Baden free jazz meeting and about these questions. But as you say it's a huge question.



DG: *I suppose if we wrap up with something general – I've asked this question in interviews with other people – but what do you think about the state of jazz today, both on*

the national level, in the UK – the position of jazz and improvised music – and on a global level, do you think it's better or worse than it has been for a while – what sort of things do you see happening, happening in the future, happening now?

AH: Well, let's start with the national level. It is still very difficult to work in this country. I teach as well, and I've made a living off the back of playing for a while. It can be done, but I simply couldn't have done it if I wasn't taking all sorts of work. Now, I pay my rent off gigs and the back of a bit of teaching, and that's all great, but it's phenomenally difficult to play with any regularity in this country. A personal gripe, as a piano player, is that the state of things is just parlous in this country – there are no instruments at all, it's completely ridiculous, particularly when you think, that, a hundred years ago, everywhere had a piano. In London, there's the Vortex, which is a beautiful instrument, but in terms of regular gigs, it's difficult to play, because nowhere has an instrument. A keyboard is a completely difficult instrument to a piano, and the piano itself is genuinely an endangered species. So part of it is an opportunity thing – it's very difficult to work in this country.

There's obviously always been this jazz mainstream where the music has been very easily marketed because, on the one hand, you can hijack and the escapism of it and the freedom of it, and you can sell an ultimately very conservative music to people, and still let them think they're having their piece. So there is a lot of mainstream music being made in this country by people who are probably doing fine financially.

Now with musicians my age, or a bit older, there's this interesting phenomenon that we've had over the past few years, with, say the growth of certain collectives, and so on. Now, don't get me wrong, there's some great players associated with these groups – I've done a couple of things with Tom Arthurs, for example, and he's got some serious stuff, he can really play. Also, Ingrid Laubrock is a fantastic player - there's a wonderful trio album coming out with Tom Rainey and Liam Noble. I was there when they recorded it; it's coming out on the Intakt label later in the year and it's really great. But, otherwise, the collective-based scene seems to me to be incredibly conservative. In some ways, I feel bad about saying this, since I love it when people are making music, and that's the important thing – but the adulation that certain bands get – let's take for example this recent 'punk-jazz' thing – is beyond me, because I don't hear the fire in the music, I don't hear the originality in the music. If I want to listen to that, I listen to the Hal Russell ensemble twenty-five years ago, absolutely blowing the shit out of that kind of music.

The people who are championing this as some new thing, did 'Machine Gun' pass them by? Where are they when Steve Noble plays, where are they when [Paul] Hession plays with Alan Wilkinson, why haven't they freaked about so much of Evan Parker's music? That music ['punk jazz'] seems to me to be tied in very much with the image of the music. So much of the product (I use the word deliberately) which is coming out of a lot of these bands seems to come from people who are more interested in the concept of musicians than in the music.

DG: *So if you market it as 'death jazz' or as 'punk jazz', then you can market it as 'free', rebellious, 'jazz with a rock attitude', that kind of thing.*

AH: Yeah, exactly, OK, so it's great, but they're not giving Arthur Doyle gigs –

well, that's an extreme example, because that's maybe not for everyone. But it's not, I don't have animosity towards the players, I simply don't know them, but I don't understand it. These guys are playing big gigs and doing fine – they're getting some nice fees for some of these– but I just don't understand it. Don't get me wrong, some of these guys are great players, and there are some great bands coming out – there's this Loop Collective band called Outhouse and they've got this lovely thing at the moment with some Wolof drummers from Gambia. It's very groove-based, there's some really nice playing, it sounds great and I really like it, but I feel that these guys are an exception, and a lot of that scene I don't understand.



So that's that – in terms of the young players in this country that I think stuff *is* happening with, from a selfish point of view I'd like to think that I've stuffed my band with a few of them. Probably no-one's taught me as much about this music as Dom [Lash], because since I went back to Oxford I've almost never played without him on bass – he's been involved in the music for a bit longer than I have, and I've learned a lot from him. He's going places now – he's now in Steve Reid's band, he's playing with some great guys, and he's an amazing player. Hannah [Marshall] is a couple of years older than me but she is first call for 'cello really – she's done some great stuff with Veryan Weston – just a wonderful, wonderful player. Javier [Carmona], amongst the young drummers on the improv scene – well, he *is* the young drummer, there are some other people, but he's phenomenal. It's totally criminal that Otto [Fischer] is not better known – he has this one record on Incus of his songs, and that's it for his recorded output – he's a really fantastic player. Another guy - I love what I've heard from Corey Mwamba, a guy from Derby who plays vibes, marimba, and dulcimer, one of Orphy's

protégées.

I mean, it's still not a very young music in this country. This is a world where Alex Ward is still being talked about as the young thing – he's been on the scene for God knows how long and you still get 'young band, featuring Alex Ward', so that's a bit odd.

But then, internationally, from my peer group or just above, there's some young guys in New York doing amazing things. I have the fortune to play in this group, the Convergence Quartet, with Taylor Ho Bynum and Harris Eistenstadt – we're touring the UK again next April, I hope – one of the most inspiring things I've ever done. They're incredible, incredible players – if you've got a regular gig with both Cecil Taylor and Braxton, then you're going to be incredible, I guess – but these guys are both making amazing music and reconciling jazz traditions with improv or classical traditions – well, not necessarily reconciling, but just forging this new kind of creative music. Peter Evans, another trumpet player, Steve Lehman, again, probably slightly older, and, older again, Craig Taborn is frighteningly good. His playing with Roscoe Mitchell... There's a quintet album called 'Turn' where Taborn is astounding. He's one of the young-ish piano players; and there's Vijay Iyer, too – I like a lot of his work – check him out with Wadada Leo Smith's 'Golden Quartet'.

It's difficult to say what kind of a state the creative music scene is in now as opposed to before. As jazz musicians, we're basically romantic. I love the idea of playing be-bop back in the be-bop era and of being a section musician in a big band – these are golden eras and we love that idea because it's a gig night, and a 'when giants walked the earth' kind of thing. It doesn't feel like that now, but, you know, I think it would just be crazy to imagine that these guys weren't struggling for gigs back then.

In terms of where the music's going, I suppose as young players, we're ultimately the one's who are going to have to influence these things, but we need to digest the music of the masters who are still living, as well as those who aren't. If you're talking about where the cutting-edge of the music is, it's Braxton, still: that Ghost-Trance box, the Iridum set, it's unbelievable and there's nothing like that on this planet. Cecil Taylor: there's nobody playing music as powerful and as original and as dynamic as that. Roscoe Mitchell; Leo Smith; Evan Parker; Lol Coxhill: these are the real masters, and part of what makes them so great is that they're still doing their thing and forging on. In terms of where the music's going, it's not something you worry about while these guys are around, and I guess it's up to the rest of us to interpret it and assimilate the information and make of it what we will. Again, this is probably not going to be one of those things that is conscious – much as we digest our own personal influences in an unconscious way, I think the music will probably evolve however it goes, organically.

DG: *Because you can't have someone absolutely copying Braxton or Cecil Taylor.*

AH: Yeah, you can't, and it's totally missing the point. I suppose this is one of the things, when people say 'if you love Tatum so much or you love Monk so much, why don't you play that music rather than this racket you play now'. Well, you know, if I listen to Charlie Parker, OK, I love the fact that he plays flat five, or sharp nine, or whatever the hell he plays, and if someone says to me play bebop, then I'm maybe thinking of some of these things, but really what I like about Charlie Parker is just the fact that this guy comes from seemingly nowhere (OK, an impression maybe bolstered by

the recording ban), but you hear this thing and it's so free and it's so vocal. What's so important about Charlie Parker is the spirit; it's that he's an original, and he's following his own nose; the least Parker-like thing conceivable is to fossilize our music into a repertory music. Thinking about how to interpret the canon, I like how Muhal [Richard Abrams] put it in one of his Delmark album titles: 'Things to Come From Those Now Gone.'

You have these conversations with guys from music college sometimes – I've got to be careful not to put too much of a downer on this, because there's some nice players coming out of there [music colleges] – but, to stereotype things, you ask, 'who are the great tenor players', and there's this fetishizing of Brecker, who had his own thing in a fusion/ post-Coltrane direction, or maybe someone like Chris Potter, Joshua Redman, or, in another direction, Scott Hamilton. I don't necessarily dislike listening to these players (although I certainly wouldn't choose to), but, as somebody who's listened to this music since I was little, and is totally in love with it, and is obsessed with Ellington, Tatum, Oliver, Bird, and so on, I personally can only get the essential spirit of this music I love from the type of artists I've been mentioning – who seem to understand that what's important is individuality, and not getting your diminished scales down really quick so that you can play super-hip licks and impress your friends. And of course, our duty in turn is to interpret the spirit of their music, and to protect their music from becoming a repertory music - in other words, to keep the whole thing as a living music. Given the time, we can all shred over 'Giant Steps', but that's just missing the point – that's a cosmetic thing. The spirit of these players is what's important, and that's what these guys – Braxton, Evan Parker, Lol Coxhill, Cecil – that's what they're doing, I think, and that's why they'll continue to be the vanguard of the music, until we don't notice that the next generation is actually the vanguard of the music. In terms of the direction I think we just have to hope that we know it when we see it.



YOUTUBE WATCH

As this is an internet-based magazine, I thought it would make sense to include this new feature, which I hope will become a regular one. Youtube is a fantastic resource in terms of the jazz and improvisation videos it hosts, from the vintage to the modern; here's a brief sample of some of the best clips that I've come across over the last few months.

Alan Wilkinson/ Pat Thomas/ Steve Noble/ John Coxon at the Vortex

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=OmBtfcnwuGg>



Recorded in May at John Russell's Mopomoso Nights, now relocated from the Red Rose to the Vortex Jazz Club, this clip provides a rare opportunity to hear the supremely-gifted but seldom heard Oxford-based pianist Pat Thomas. Wilkinson is one of the most passionate free jazz players on the scene, and with a lot more variety to his playing than that displayed by some other musicians: conviction coupled with ability, virtuosity with 'feeling' in the most compelling way. This particular performance has a slow, solemn beginning which builds to a passionate crescendo and erupts into a tribal-flavoured central section in which Wilkinson yodels and hollers (more with joy than pain), before vocalising through his extremely versatile sax. Coxon, looking not a little like a young Derek Bailey in his red jumper and glasses, plucks and scrapes in the background, and Noble ensures everyone stays on their toes, but this music is dominated by Thomas and Wilkinson, who play as if their lives depended on it.

Wilkinson/ Thomas/ Noble/ Coxon at Flim Flam

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=ESPslCgOW2Y>

A few months earlier (in February 2008), the same group performed at Alan Wilkinson's Flim Flam club. Thomas is on keyboards this time, and the feel is very different - things are much edgier, and as liable to explode into a dense ensemble melange as to skitter and chatter away from a definite centre. On the first clip, things feel a bit hesitant to start off with, Coxon plucking a slightly banal melody as if unsure in which direction to take the music, but once they settle for sheer out assault, things get interesting (and extremely loud!). Wilkinson once more demonstrates his range, making fluttering bird-like noises and more vocalised exhortations (the range of sounds he can get from his instrument is something easily overlooked in favour of the sheer passionate impact of his playing, but the *resourcefulness* with which he plays impresses me just as much as the gritty integrity he brings to the music).

Phil Minton - The Cutty Wren

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=7i7zdS7MHp8>



Like the Wilkinson/Thomas/Noble/Coxon Vortex clip, this video was recorded by Helen Petts, a visual artist, painter and film-maker who, having worked in the mainstream TV and film industries, has recently begun focusing on her particular interest in contemporary music and free improvisation. Together, these videos provide an excellent overview of the many wonderful things currently happening on the British free improv scene: proof that there is plenty of wonderful music out there that seems destined to remain perpetually 'underground'. And so to 'The Cutty Wren.' Whereas much twentieth-

century folk-inspired music seems rather twee and naive (part of its charm for a lot of people), the original material often deals with very grim subject matter, with the realities of life for ordinary people. That's certainly true of this song, which turns out to be about eating policemen! More specifically, about eating the Cutty Wren, the mercenary police who clashed with the peasants during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. When the peasants managed to kill a 'wren', they would then eat them, to destroy the evidence and stave off starvation. Phil Minton, more often heard in a free improvising context, takes vocal duties, with accompaniment from fellow free improviser Veryan Weston at the piano. Minton's extended techniques are massively impressive, though his use of them can verge on the hystrionic. Or, to put it more favourably, he has a great sense of drama. Listen to the way he treats this song, giving it extra shades through adopting different accents and giving it all a gravelly, gritty fervour, as well as adding a dose of macabre humour to proceedings, to ensure that the lyrics' repetitive structure builds up an impressive cumulative intensity. His voice ain't exactly pretty, but then, he's not singing about pretty subject matter: "Oh how will you cut her up said Milder to Moulder/ With knives and with forks said John the Red Nose/ Oh that will not do said Milder to Moulder/ Great hatchets and cleavers said John the Red Nose."

Piet Kuiters with John Tchicai and Cadentia Nova Danica

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=v8xJ1aPz8bE>

Rare footage from the 1967 Molde Festival, shot in elegant black-and-white. Two years after the recording of Coltrane's 'Ascension', Danish/Congolese saxophonist and composer Tchicai was perhaps at the peak of his powers, and, when, with support from Danish Radio, who were programming weekly programmes of native new music, he formed this fascinating Scandinavian ensemble, featuring pianist Kuiters (who can also be seen in another clip, performing alongside the poet Ted Joans ('Jazz is my Religion')). The video is especially valuable because the groups' recorded albums are out of print (though they occasionally crop up as downloads on the blog scene). An interesting piece, almost tentative in the subdued way it unfolds, and with great textural subtlety: there's no drummer, only a percussionist, which gives things a very different rhythmic feel to many free jazz groups of the time. (In fact, it might be a bit of a stretch to call this 'free jazz' at all). In the 'related videos' link on the right hand-side of the video window, make sure you also check out a much more recent performance by Tchicai: in duo with Tony Marsh at St Giles' Church in London, during February 2008.

Art Ensemble of Chicago with Cecil Taylor

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=Ah5OVkgUtF8>

Only an excerpt from the complete concert, but what an excerpt! Cecil opens with a melancholy piano solo, at one point playing a figure so potent, so beautiful, so *right*, that Lester Bowie tilts back his head and closes his eyes in ecstatic contemplation. The bulk of the clip features Taylor and Bowie in duet, the pianist dominating the music, the trumpeter feeling his way over the top; towards the end, Bowie begins to duet (or collide) with saxophonist Josphe Jarman. Very special, although it focusses less than I would have liked on the shared African influences in Taylor's and the Ensemble's music. If you

dig around the site, there's also a rather fine (and complete!) solo concert by Taylor from around the same time, the mid-80s.

New York New York Art Quartet

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=ErS4Kx1Bey0>

A complete concert from the 2002 Willisau Festival, with an intriguing line-up: John Zorn, Roswell Rudd, Reggie Workman and Milford Graves. Not quite the original New York Art Quartet then, though they did perform with John Tchicai in 1999 (and, in fact, recorded an album: '35th Reunion', on DIW). Of course, Zorn is a very different creature to Tchicai, whose cool yet passionate lyricism provided a contrast to the anarchic and jokey tendencies of Grave and Rudd. As indicated by the title, then, this incarnation of the group focusses much on the playful and ritualistic - that's not to say, of course, that it's in any way superficial. Rather, it's an intensely joyful and life-affirming experience: Graves is an expert on the healing properties of music, and very much a visual, as well as aural performer, compelling whether he's singing alongside the muted trombone, erupting into a rhythmic volley on the drum set, staggering around the stage in a beguilingly shambolic dance routine, or simply playing his ass off in support of the horns. Zorn, in his baggy yellow T-shirt and combat trousers, unleashes some really scalding, screeching playing, while Rudd whoops alongside him or bursts into the sort of marching-band feel that he employed to such great effect with Archie Shepp in the 60s. As one of the comments puts it: "like being at church...or the track!"



CD REVIEWS INDEX



“Criticism is always the easiest art.”

- Cornelius Cardew

ARTHURS / HOIBY / RITCHIE – Explications

AUTECHRE – Quaristice

BJORNSTAD, KETL / RYPDAL, TERJE – Life in Leipzig

BY ANY MEANS – Live at Crescendo

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CHABALA, BARRY/ HARGREAVES, PHIL - Musick for Two Machines

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CONVERGENCE QUARTET– Live in Oxford

COWLEY, NEIL (TRIO)- Loud...Louder...Stop!

D’ANGELO, ANDREW – Skadra Degis

DUNMAL/ STEPHENS/ MARSH– All Said and Dun

DUNMALL, PAUL/ MINTS, ROMAN - Exodus

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EL’ ZABAR, KAHIL (RITUAL TRIO FEAT. PHAROAH SANDERS) – Ooh Live!

FERNANDEZ/ PARKER/ GUY/ LYTTON – Topos

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fURT PLUS – Equals

IYER, VIJAY – Tragicomic

JN, Ilton – The Rats Rain Down

KALLERDAHL, LINDA – Gold

LIEBMAN/ ESKELIN/ MARIANO/ BLACK – Renewal

LONDON IMPROVISERS ORCHESTRA/ GLASGOW IMPROVISERS

ORCHESTRA– Separately and Together

LYCANTHROPE OBOE– Hiding in the Long Grass/ Staring at the Waking Sky
MAUPIN, BENNIE (QUARTET) – EARLY REFLECTIONS
MEKURYA, GETATCHEW/ THE EX – Moa Anbessa
MERZBOW – Here
METHENY, PAT (TRIO) – Day Trip
PARKER, EVAN/ TRANSATLANTIC ART ENSEMBLE – Boustrophedon
RETURN OF THE NEW THING - Alchemy
ROBERTS, MATANA – The Chicago Project
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WINSTONE, NORMA (TRIO) - DISTANCES

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DVDs

HARPER, BILLY– In Concert: Live From Poland

Books

LEWIS, GEORGE – A Power Stronger than Itself

Reviewers: Roger Farbey, David Grundy, Stef Gijssels, Daniel Melnick, Tomasz Nadrowski

ARTHURS / HOIBY / RITCHIE – *EXPLICATIONS*



Label: Not Applicable

Release Date: March 2008

Tracklist: Blind Chance;
Expulsion; Strangely Wired; Up
from Sloth; Untitled # 1; Leaves;
Chocolate and Zucchini; Second
Base

Personnel: Tom Arthurs:
flugelhorn, trumpet; Jasper Hoiby:
bass; Stu Ritchie: drums

An interesting trio, who've already made quite a bit of a buzz for themselves, so I suppose it's slightly unfair to put them in the category of 'up-and-coming' – but it does seem to me that, though they display some very promising signs for the future, their

concept is not quite fully developed at this stage (and it's probably unrealistic to expect it to be). Probably the biggest problem is that, at times, things could be said to be somewhat lacking in emotion, which leads to things seeming rather clever-clever and clinical, but without the same level of deep intellectual engagement generated by the best free improvisation and free jazz (full engagement of mind and body). It's a criticism you could also layer at the mathematically-based work of Fieldwork, and one that has frequently (and mistakenly) been leveled at Anthony Braxton, who is accused of being 'cerebral' when his playing can actually be distinctly 'hot'.

Arthur's duo with pianist Richard Fairhurst from last year, which yielded the album 'Mesmer', also on Babel, focused more on the hushed, the delicate, the barely-there; 'Explications' is a little more aggressive, even if at times it can feel a little constricted, set within rather tight bounds – and perhaps that accounts for the emotional constriction, too. At these moments, it's very controlled, but more in the sense that such control limits the music's possibilities, than that it leads to greater freedom, to a furtherance of expressive means (as in, say, 'reductionism', where playing quietly and with silence could be said to be a restriction, but allows the performer to reach deeper into themselves).

Let's focus on the positives though – while, ultimately, this just lacks something, some full level of engagement, it's still a very fine album. Compositionally Arthurs shows a lot of promise, his themes sounding like the sort of musical figures that could emerge in one of his improvisations ('Blind Chance'). There's an angularity here that recalls the linear, up-down dissonance of Anthony Braxton's Ghost Trance Music, though without quite the same level of textural (or musical) complexity. Arthur's choice of the flugelhorn allows him to explore more sonorous, darker low registers, though well-placed smears and little upward squeals are an essential part of the way he constructs his solos and builds tension. Hoiby and Ritchie tend to keep things going without really drawing

attention to themselves, though they are afforded concise solo features at times. Thankfully, they don't take these slots as opportunities for grandstanding, but play in a way that furthers, or develops, the overall momentum, their contributions at the service of the music rather than of ego. One senses that the trio have really worked hard at developing this level of interaction, perhaps devising certain strategies to ensure freshness – or maybe it all happens spontaneously, which would be all the more remarkable.

Formally, it's frequently interesting – repeating ostinato figures (usually from bass and drums, though sometimes initiated by Arthurs) often signal, or force, a change of direction, ensuring things never stay still for too long. When the band fall into a groove, then, it's not for easy coasting, something to fall back on when they fall out of ideas, but frequently to *build* intensity (as on the conclusion of 'Second Base'). Perhaps, as I've suggested, this trio's interest in 'explications' (detail, and structure), overshadows the need for a stronger emotional component, but they should by no means abandon their investigations into these areas – it's refreshing to see jazz musicians engaging with them in this way, and Arthurs/ Hoiby / Ritchie are definitely ones to watch.

(Review by David Grundy)

AUTECHRE – *QUARISTICE/ QUARISTICE (versions)*



Label: Warp Records

Release Date: January 2008 (digital release) March 2008 (CD/LP release)

Tracklist:

Quaristice – Altibzz; The Plc; IO; plyPhon; Perlence; SonDERemawe; Simmm; paralel Suns; Steels; Tankakern; rale; Fol3; fwzE; 90101-51-l; bnc Castl; Theswere; WNSN; chenc9; Notwo; Outh9X

Quaristice (versions) – Altichyre; The PlcCpC; IO (mons); Phylopn; Perlence range 3; SonDERe-ix; Tankraken; fol4; 90101-61-01; chenc9-x; nofour

Personnel: Sean Booth, Rob Brown (Autechre): electronics

Additional Information: The digital release (MP3 and FLAC) can be downloaded from bleep.com. Also available, through bleep.com and iTunes, is a 13-track EP, consisting of alternate takes from the album. The EP is entitled 'Quaristice.Quadrangle.ep.ae'.

Autechre's latest is a bit of a mish-mash, hit-and-miss effort, it has to be said. Rather than the lengthy pieces which fill up many of their other albums, we instead get fifteen short tracks, mostly around three minutes in length, which never really settle down to make a unified statement, to make up a consistent whole – although unity of a sort is provided by the way that beat-less, quasi-ambient pieces open and close the album. Maybe repeated listenings would reveal some sort of arc, and that's one of the disadvantages of reviewing new releases for a magazine – there's often simply not the time to digest things as much as you would want to (though I do try to give each album several hearings, rather than simply going by first-listen impressions). So perhaps the fact that 'Quaristice' doesn't seem to work is my fault, rather than Autechre's.

Still, I have the sneaking suspicion that they have just rather got ideas overload. Listening to Disc 2 of 'versions' reinforces this impression. On the 'proper' version, with the shorter tracks, something's lacking – but it's not just that Autechre have 'sold out' their machine-like grittiness for a more commercial edge. True, the tracks are shorter, but, though there's nothing to compare to the 11-minute musique concrete of 'Fol4' on the longer album, there's still some pulverising stuff. Thing is, it never lasts long enough to achieve the cumulative, repetitive intensity that Autechre's best music possesses: instead of a juggernaut of jittery dance music, we have something that feels more elliptically robotic. As dance music in itself (i.e. music to shake your body to) it's not the greatest, and as a listen (i.e. sitting down in 'reviewer' mode), it's a bit too inconsistent – fragments come and go, none really being developed (or repeated) for long enough to hold the attention. That's why 'Versions' really should have been the 'proper' release – the ambient pieces cross over into 'satisfying listen' territory.

The pieces that do seem to be there to give the album some sort of arc, such as the opener, 'Altibzz', or the synth-pad textures of 'parallel suns', end up feel somewhat cheesy, like the soundtrack to an 80s sci-fi film with dated computer animated special effects, rather than the majestic aura they were presumably aiming for. That said, you can never be sure that what they're doing doesn't have something of the ironic, bitter joke about it – they may not be tricksters in quite the same nihilistically black-comic way as Aphex Twin, but they do have the same irreverent streak.

(Review by David Grundy)

KETIL BJORNSTAD/ TERJE RYPDAL – *LIFE IN LEIPZIG*



Label: ECM

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: The Sea V; The Pleasure is Mine, I'm Sure; The Sea II; Flotation and Surroundings; Easy Now; Notturmo (fragment); Alai's Room; By the Fjord; The Sea IX; Le Manfred/Foran Peisen; The Return of Per Ulv.

Personnel: Ketil Bjørnstad: piano; Terje Rypdal: guitar

Additional Information: Recorded live in Leipzig, October 2005.

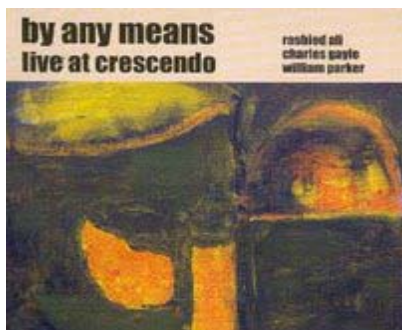
Two Norwegians with long-standing reference on the ECM label play a live album, recorded in Leipzig, Germany. Bjørnstad on piano, Rypdal on guitar. Two musicians that are not alike at all in style, yet very close in mood. Bjørnstad is classically trained, and plays in a rich romantic, impressionistic style. Rypdal comes from a rock background, and has hence a much more direct approach, not hindered by a broad guitar technique. But technique is one thing, playing music and making music is something else, and both are absolute masters at that, Rypdal even more than Bjørnstad, I think. But in essence, both are romantics, and it's not surprising that they meet in a jazz environment. Despite their difference in approach and style, they meet each other in perfect harmony of mood and musical vision. Rypdal's typical distorted high-toned full chamber full reverb guitar sound clashes with the piano's unadulterated sound, but only initially. Once you get used to the combination, it works.

It is clear that Björnstad has the lead, setting out the themes of the songs, with Rypdal reacting in counterpoint, or giving harmonic depth to the melody, or expanding it in wild improvisations. "The Sea II" demonstrates the full range of what these musicians can offer : emotional power, sentimental and musical explorations without becoming cheap, playing music that is as much Debussy as it is Pink Floyd or jazz. On the last-but-one track Rypdal takes the lead from Björnstad, creating a dark multilayered guitar synth environment full of echo and feedback, as a lead-in to the grand finale, which is jubilant, joyful and as expansive as you might hope for.

I once was a fervent fan of Rypdal (especially for his "Odyssey" (vinyl version) or his trio with Miroslav Vitous and Jack DeJohnette, both on ECM and highly recommended), but lost interest once he became too mellow and déjà-vu. But this one is great. Melodic, intimate and expansive, and the audacious confrontation between the soft and subtle piano with the sustained wailing guitar works well, works very well.

(Review by Stef Gisjells, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com>)

BY ANY MEANS – *LIVE AT CRESCENDO* (2 CD)



Label: Ayler Records

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: CD 1 - Introduction; Zero Blues; Hearts Joy; We Three; Different Stuff; Love One Another; Straight Ahead Steps/ CD 2 - Peace Inside; Machu Picchu; Cry Nu; Eternal Voice; No Sorrow

Personnel: Charles Gayle: alto sax; William Parker: bass; Rashied Ali: drums.

Additional Information: Recorded on October 19, 2007 at Club Crescendo, Norrköping, Sweden. Available from

www.ayler.com

It is probably a very personal and subjective thing, but there is nothing in jazz that beats the clean, direct and undistorted naked sound of small improvising ensembles. It is often music straight from the heart of the musicians, without complicated arrangements or post-editing, but with depth, also speaking directly to the heart of the listener. And that is what I like about Charles Gayle. He is often criticized for his screaming and wailing, and sure, not everything he does is successful, but on this performance, recorded in Norköpping in Sweden in October last year, he is in great shape, as are of course William Parker and Rashied Ali, performing together under the band name "By Any Means".

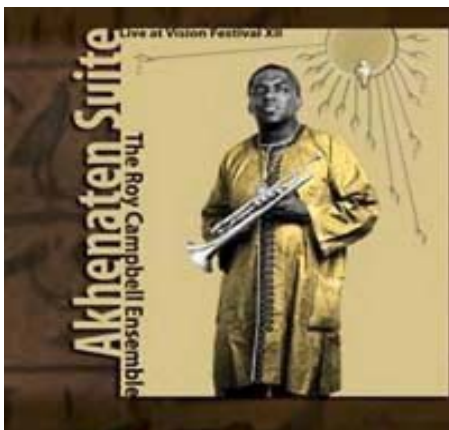
This is free jazz, free bop and free blues in its purest form, and a real joy from beginning to end. Gayle has the strange habit to play the main theme of the different tunes in a blaring, almost unrespectful way, as if he can't wait to start improvising, but once he starts doing that, his tone becomes warmer, richer, deeper and a real pleasure to hear. Parker and Ali are also at their best, both acting as full members of a trio, equally represented in getting the credits for the tracks as for the solo time they have.

One of the highlights of the album is "Macchu Picchu", which starts with a sensitive five-minute sarco "intro" by Parker, which evolves into a slow and bluesy improvisation by Gayle. On the following track Ali shows all his skills, both in power-play and in rhythmic subtleties. The second part of the set is much more powerful than the first one, with Parker really bringing out the best in Gayle, in a more free

environment, more expressive and creative, with Ali in a role which could befit Paul Motian, suggesting rhythms and accentuating where necessary. A strong performance.

(Review by Stef Gisjells, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)

ROY CAMPBELL – *AKHENATEN SUITE*



Label: AUM Fidelity

Release Date: March 2008

Tracklist: Akhenaten (Amenophis, Amenhotep IV); Aten and Amarna; Pharaoh's Revenge (Akhenaten) Intro Part 1; Pharaoh's Revenge Part 1; Pharaoh's Revenge (Tutankhamun) Intro Part 2; Pharaoh's Revenge Part 2; Sunset On The Nile.

Personnel: Roy Campbell: trumpet, flugelhorn, recorder, argul; Billy Bang: violin; Bryan Carrott: vibraharp; Hilliard Greene: bass; Zen Matsuura: drums.

Roy Campbell has always been one of my favorite musicians, because of the unbelievable emotional strength of his trumpet playing and his musical vision. For this album, recorded live at the Vision Festival in 2007, he teams up with some of his former band-mates and musical friends : Billy Bang on violin, Bryan Carrott on vibraharp, Hilliard Greene on bass and Zen Matsuura on drums. Truth be told, I am not a fan of the violin (in a jazz context) nor of the vibraphone (in general), with some exceptions of course. Luckily, this is one of those exceptions.

Campbell has always had an interest in ancient Egypt, and this is his second Nile Suite if you want, the first one is the one with Dennis Gonzalez (highly recommended). This album is very much in the same vein, with long slow pieces, full of middle-eastern scales and spiritual yearning. The pieces all are relatively traditional in their format, with a strong rhythmic basis and a recognisable theme. The rhythms are jazzy, middle-eastern and even a little Latin at times. The themes are long, broad, dramatic, cinematic, impressive and imposing, nicely evoking the power and the spiritual vision of the great pharaoh Akhnaten, who - in order to break the power of the ruling classes of priests - claimed that there was only one god. A major epidemic outbreak swept through the region, killing a large part of the population. His opponents claimed that this was caused by the wrath of the gods. His son Tutankhamun succeeded him on the throne at the age of nine. After his reign, his religious beliefs were overruled by the class of priests, and both father and son were even deleted from all records in the pharaoh' lineage.

So - drama enough to inspire Campbell's fantastic suite, in which his trumpet-playing deservedly plays a major role, with Bang and Carrott nicely contributing and offering the necessary depth and contrast. Campbell's soloing is melodic but above all wailing and crying, varying between intimacy and powerplay, and emotionally strong in a way that few trumpeters can equal. Green and Matsuura's contributions are excellent and very functional in helping to create the overall coherent atmosphere. Grand and majestic music! (Review by Stef Gisjells (<http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>))

BARRY CHABALA/ PHIL HARGREAVES - *MUSICK FOR TWO MACHINES*



Two CDs of solo improvisations, each consisting of 38 different tracks, recorded at different times, on different locations, with different instruments, and by different people; when played simultaneously on CD players in shuffle mode, these make up the album, 'Musick for Two Machines'. This provides an intriguing dilemma for the reviewer, in that no two experiences of the recording will be the same (perhaps there is a one-in-a-million chance of the same random duplication of tracks - I haven't calculated the probability).

There can be no claim to have had the last word on what is heard, then – and, lest we forget, criticism is a subjective art, so I suppose the position I'm put in here is little different to that I'm normally in, however I may try to obscure it elsewhere. Essentially what I'm going to do, then, is to highlight my personal listening experience (or at least, one of those experiences). Putting the 'critic hat' on for a moment, though, one might worry or expect that such Hargreaves' and Chabala's self-conscious play with the mechanics of listening (and playing) could result in something unsuccessful, a case of concept dominating at the expense of musical cohesion. Well, perhaps cohesion isn't the point – but is that at the expense of (that oh so subjective term), musical value?

In fact, having said that cohesion is not what's aimed for, what surprises me on hearing this is the way that the two discs do chime together in such a sympathetic way, even though programmed on shuffle mode. This is far less a Cageian investigation into chance than a music (or musick) that oscillates between togetherness and apartness, cohesion and separation, collusion and contradiction. Of course, there are occasional jolts, when one track continues while another shifts to something different, but that's to be expected, and it's not all that different to the sort of interactions and structural approaches in a lot of improv which *doesn't* have this set-up.

My two CD players chose to pick track one on the Hargreaves disc and thirty-four on the Chabala; a particularly nice combination of guitar drone and long, held notes/pauses on the saxophone. Of course, the point is not to program in combinations which will somehow lead to the 'ideal format', the album that nestles within the package.

This isn't a puzzle in which the bits will join up together to create the same picture every time; there is no code, no 'solution'. The quotation from Andre Breton printed on the back of the CD seems particularly apposite: "beauty must be convulsive, or not at all." That applies to the shifts, the jolts I mentioned earlier; and perhaps, after all, these are where the real value of the music lies – not in the moments of always-surprising cohesion, but in the moments of jolt, of dislocation, fragmentation, as when the end of one guitar track coincides with a hard-edged saxophone blurt. Elsewhere, there's collision between fragments of almost neo-classical guitar melody, completely silent tracks, a short mellow, jazzy saxophone line, and scraping, machine-like laptop sounds.

This all avoids the *product-making* of music, emphasizing its uniqueness as an encounter, an experience, rather than a repeatable commodity (and thus avoiding the problems with recording improvised music that Cornelius Cardew addresses in 'Towards an Ethic of Improvisation'). Paradoxically, the status of music as a one-off experience is something that was widespread only before the age of recording technology, yet here it is re-created by utilizing the technology of the CD. Such issues and concerns obviously preoccupy Hargreaves, as seen in several of the releases on his label, whi-music: last year's collaboration with Glenn Weyant, 'Friday Morning Everywhere', or the 'Cadavre Exquis' project, in which different musicians layer new improvisations on top of those previously posted to the site, so that the completed tracks ends up sounding nothing like the original (if, that is, it can ever said to be 'complete'). Ideas of 'completion' are thus challenged, left right and centre, and the listeners' fluid relationship to the work reasserted over its possession by marketing men and record companies who pretend to give us what we want (while manufacturing these wants).

(Review by David Grundy)

CLOAKS – SERENE



Label: Students of Decay

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: dream tape number one;
improvisation for guitar and piano

Personnel: Cloaks (Spencer Doran):
piano, guitar, electronics.

Additional Information: 5" CD-R,
released in a limited run of 100 copies
(currently sold out). Available from
www.studentsofdecay.com.

Portland-based musician Spencer Doran's early work has tended towards the beat-based (on an EP of remixes), but it's as 'Cloaks' that he really seems to have made his most interesting music so far. The lengthy, blessed-out ambience of last year's 'A Crystal Skull in Peru' resembled a more electronically-minded Popul Vuh, and it sets the trend for this sublime release, its follow-up. The minimal liner notes inform us that this was recorded at various different cities during 2006 and 2007, on borrowed pianos; very much a D.I.Y. enterprise, then. Mind you, I think that element could have been taken further: I would have liked to see (or, more accurately, hear) a little more of the lo-fi grit that's suggested by the 'tape' in the title of the first track (and by the opening and closing effects placed on the music), mixed in with the ecstatic swirl of piano, guitar, and little bursts of voice (the latter occurring at moments of extreme happiness). That said, perhaps it was best to keep the FX side of thing subdued, in order to avoid them overwhelming things – and they still play an important role in the construction of the music, as the various overdubbed tracks (mainly piano generated) swirl around each other, clanging, whizzing and wheezing past in reversed format, or blurring through other electronic treatments.

The best description I can think of for this kind of music would be 'ecstatic drone' (even if there's not always a drone to speak of, the effect of the repeating fragments is to suggest one, to induce a similar state). Ultimately, as its title suggests, it is about serenity – about the state of sereneness, of being at peace with oneself. At the same time, the sort of ecstasy it expresses always seems to be reaching for something higher. A piano phrase repeats at regular intervals, yet it seems about to be played a lot more, just never quite managing it. There's a strong yearning quality, a mixed human experience that speaks so much of joy and satisfaction yet contains the realization that this cannot go on for ever, that the moment can only be suspended so long. In other music of this type, that feeling of things passing is partly due to the physical limitations of the performer – one can only hammer at single notes and repeated phrases for so long before hands start bleeding and the whole body becomes exhausted, à la Charlemagne Palestine. I guess Palestine's repeated piano work, such as 'Strumming Music', is where this takes its cue from, although it's a different aesthetic.

It's music of blur and haze; but what's not really important is individual phrases, but the overall effect. As in the best (early) minimalism, shifts occur without the listener consciously noticing them – put the track on at 10 minutes, listen for a minute, then at 20, and you'll notice a big difference, but listen to all in one go (as you should) and it drifts along. Particularly on 'dream tape number one', there is the feel a long drawn out crescendo; but, unlike Ravel's 'Bolero', where you can witness the gradual increase from beginning to end, it is only the centre of a crescendo that this music inhabits. There aren't any particularly startling dynamic shifts, and it unfolds at pretty much the same level (though there are notable moments of climax, of increased intensity (such as the chiming high note figure that comes in at around the 30 minute mark)). Yet it has the *feel* of crescendo, just as it has the *feel* of serenity – it *inhabits* performer, listener and state. I'll stop there, before I get dangerously close to New Age hippyisms, pausing only to note that track 2 is more of the same, though a little more stripped down, a little less hazy, with a little more clarity about it. And, just in case I haven't made myself clear enough already: I can't recommend this highly enough.

(Review by David Grundy)

THE CONVERGENCE QUARTET– *LIVE IN OXFORD*

Label: FMR

Release Date: May 2007

Tracklist: Miscellaneous; Goad; Convergence; Goodbye, Sir; mm (pf)

Personnel: Taylor Ho Bynum: cornet, flugelhorn; Alexander Hawkins: piano, small instruments; Dominic Lash: bass; Harris Eisenstadt: drums

Additional Information: Recorded live at the Jacqueline Du Pré Music Building, Oxford.

Even in ‘progressive’ music circles, it can still seem that a kind of skewed nationalistic thinking predominates: Brotzmann’s aggressive image and sound is somehow the embodiment of part of the German national psyche, Derek Bailey’s playing embodies the attitude of the of down-to-earth, ‘unfussy’ Sheffield man (so often descriptions of him seem to be as much about the way he conducted himself on stage as about what he played), etc. But, as projects like this indicate, there’s often a lot more common ground between musicians of different nationalities than there may between people of the same nationality. What’s more, this is a group of young musicians, living in an age when contact with those from different national jazz scenes is a lot easier. The internet has a lot to do with this, in all probability, and, indeed, the quartet are billed as “the first fully-blogging jazz group.”

Blogs or not, the thing that really matters is that they’re all fine individual musicians, but have combined to create group that’s noticeably co-operative in intent: each one contributes a composition (Bynum offers two, which bookend the disc), and no one seems particularly concerned with grabbing a leadership role. One could say that the group itself is the leader – and where the collective music happens to be heading at any particular time is where things lead. In other words, there’s something nicely loose and relaxed about strict structure, though it’s never directionless (and, one suspects, is often under strict supervision from at least one player).

Pianist Alexander Hawkins shares such an ethos: can be expansive in his approach – he clearly has the technique to be as florid as he likes – but he is also tightly controlled and keenly aware of what’s going on around him, so that he’s as likely to be providing textural detail, by plucking the strings inside the piano or using ‘small’ instruments (undoubtedly an AACM influence, although sparingly employed), as he is to roam the length and breadth of the keyboard.

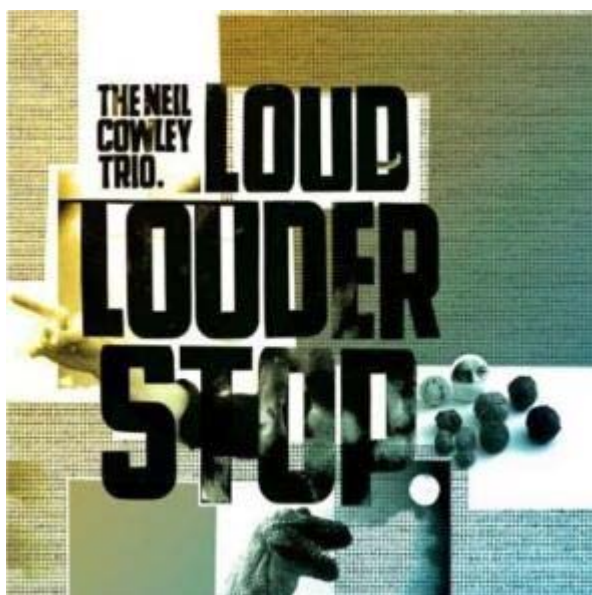
Meanwhile, Taylor Ho Bynum’s experiences with Mr Braxton have obviously taught him a great deal, but here, he moves beyond those limits to a more overtly jazzy approach than that required by the Ghost Trance Musics. Mind you, that doesn’t mean he dusts off his Clifford Brown hard-bop licks – it often seems that he’s deliberately avoiding a ‘clean’ tone for lots of brarps and growls which hark back instead to early ‘primitives’/pioneers. Such expressive effects, and a wicked sense of timing, impart his playing with a cheeky sense of humour, too. So, as ‘miscellaneous’ opens, he rumbles away over what sound like slightly slowed down jazz piano lines and the clattery clangingness of Eisenstadt’s drums – the whole thing feels deliciously woozy, though the melody reveals itself to have an obsessional quality that is shot through with dark beauty. That melody doesn’t come in for several minutes, though, and that’s one thing I particularly like about the disc: there’s plenty going on, but there’s always plenty of space for it to happen. Rather than rushing through the ‘head’ to get onto the solos, the

quartet test the waters first, establishing a mood and atmosphere out of disparate fragments which gradual converge – once some sort of collusion is reached, the texture and musical direction may then be subtly altered, abruptly departed from, or indeed, continued, by the written parts.

Of course, the idea of ‘convergence’ seems to be an important one, given the name of the group – I won’t go into at great length here, but I will note that the titles on this disc just beg to be picked up on as a way of describing the music. ‘Goads’, the second track, opens with low register piano and breathy trumpet squalls; Eisenstadt seems to be the one functioning as the ‘goader’, prodding Bynum to blow a few brash phrases as the piano builds up rolling low-tones, then suddenly departs for more skittering insect-jazz. Meanwhile, it’s tempting to see Hawkins’ ‘Goodbye Sir’ as a half-respectful, half-disrespectful nod to jazz tradition: respect for the things that makes the music fresh, disrespect for all sterility and cliché. If ‘Live in Oxford’ is anything to go by, the group’s 2009 UK tour is looking as if it could be one of the musical highlights of next year.

(Review by David Grundy)

THE NEIL COWLEY TRIO – *LOUD, LOUDER...STOP!*



Label: Cake

Release Date: March 2008

Tracklist: His Nibs; Dinoasaur Die; Scaredy Cat; Ginger Shepp; Clumsy Couple; Captain Backfire; Well; We are Here to Make Plastic; Synaesthesia Traffic; Streets Paved with Half Baguettes Pt 2

Personnel: Neil Cowley: piano; Richard Sadler: bass; Evan Jenkins: bass

Neil Cowley dusts the cobwebs off boring old strait-laced jazz and reinvents it for the modern age as something relevant and exciting once more... Yeah right. This release represents an approach to jazz which is becoming worryingly typical of many young bands (almost de rigeur, one might say). Yet have its fawning admirers considered the possibility that it is actually less interesting than the sort of more conventional/ historically-placed approach that those described by one reviewer as “hoary old relics”

revere so much? Is eclecticism in itself a good thing, or is relentlessly following your own path more a case of sticking to your guns rather than picking-and-choosing elements to try and create a patchwork individuality? Let's have variety, sure, but not for the sake of it, not because we must reject compartmentalizing at all costs, but because it makes musical, intellectual and emotional sense to do so: because the music makes it necessary, rather than external factors making it necessary. I'm not so sure that Cowley and all the other magpie musicians realize this distinction, and if they do, it doesn't show in their music, which doesn't feel vital in the way that great jazz (or music of any genre) does.

OK, so some of the music is admittedly quite engaging – 'His Nibs' has a gothic, almost horror-film ambience about it, as Cowley obsessively pounds out loud chords over a rock beat – not going to reward much repeated 'deep listening', but quite entertaining while it lasts. As is made clear by the following track, 'Dinosaur Die', though, they really just want to be a rock band – substitute guitar for piano playing those chords and you are in the world of Radiohead, and in their more conventional rock guise as well.

On 'Clumsy Couple', an off-kilter melody loses all its promise as the band can find little to do with it apart from repeat it at different volume levels. Cowley's touch is frequently very heavy, the beat is simplistically rockish (as opposed to the more slightly interesting approach of the Bad Plus' Dave King, which really added a muscular energy that Evan Jenkins' more prosaic, straightforward pulse can't sustain – though that is what they're aiming for). Essentially, this is instrumental rock music, and to claim it as jazz is wrong. It's like they've taken the Bad Plus' attitude without the deconstructive element – postmodernism becoming regression in the guise of the new. In the second half, as Cowley takes the melody into more reflective, tinkling realms, with the sustain pedal depressed throughout, it attains a sort of delicacy which is once again engaging, but the temptation to build things up for another noisy climax proves too much.

The title of the record indicates the template from which most of the tracks are constructed – and, while it's useless to complain about noise levels (free jazz doesn't exactly go easy on the dynamics, after all), it does seem fair to complain that Cowley seems to think noise substitutes for invention, for having anything to say. Rock bands often work out on just a three-chord riff, by plugging it in and belting it out – Cowley's attempt to do the same sort of thing in a jazz context just doesn't work, and, as often happens with these uneasy fusions, ends up consisting of the worst of both worlds.

(Review by David Grundy)

ANDREW D'ANGELO – *SKADRA DEGIS*

Label: Skirl Records

Release Date: January 2008

Tracklist: Lame; Egna Ot Waog; Fam Hana; 25 Hits; Rutloosic; Tune Blue; Morthana; Be Bo Bee Bee; Fichtik; Gay Disco

Personnel: Andrew D'Angelo: alto sax, bass clarinet; Trevor Dunn: bass; Jim Black: drums, electronics.

Three big names of modern jazz: Andrew D'Angelo on sax, Trevor Dunn on bass and Jim Black on drums. When I first listened to the CD, a strong memory of the Thomas Chapin trio arose: a powerful sax trio, which often starts tracks with a strong riff-like vamp, as the kick-off for great improvisations, always with a strong sense of melody and rhythm, fierce, hard-hitting yet at times sentimental and romantic: in other words : a

weird combination but it works. The three musicians have been working in various fields of jazz, always on the look-out for new adventures, new trials and opportunities to enlarge their own horizon, mixing styles and blending genres, and it's good to hear them in such a straight-ahead trio format, yet the amazing thing is that they kind of integrate the findings from their adventures into rock, avant-garde, balkan and electronic jazz in the acoustic music they bring here. Andrew D'Angelo and Jim Black also play together in Hilmar Jenson's Tyft, and in The Human Feel, with Kurt Rosenwinkel and Chris Speed, but the music is not comparable. The Human Feel brings more composed avant-garde jazz - and I wasn't too impressed with last year's "Galore", but on this record, feeling is much more important than form. This album is also miles away from D'Angelo's Scandinavian aggressive hard noise free jazz adventure with the Morthana trio.

One of the many qualities of this band is the variation in the compositions. The first track is powerful free bop adventure, the second starts with a strong bass line for four minutes of melodic polyrhythmic joy (with Dunn leading the dance), the third a kind of ballad that goes haywire without losing focus, the fourth a relentless hard-hitter (with Black in a leading role), followed by the romantic more abstract "Rutloosic", which starts with a great and intense conversation between bass clarinet and arco bass, "Morthana" is built around a joyful boppy tune on alto, while "Boo Be Boo Bee Bee" (great title!) is a dark moody avant piece with long abstract lines and bowed bass evolving into pure madness alternating with an almost classical melody, collapsing into madness again, etc., while "Fichtik" is full of tender sentiment, and "Gay Disco" brings us back to Thomas Chapin territory : a high energy full speed melodic and powerful theme as lead-in for improv, with bass and drum demonstrating what it means to have rhythm! ... This combination of raw energy, melodic themes, musical adventure and emotional expressiveness works well for D'Angelo. He gets the freedom here that he seems to have missed in the past. Great album!

Note: In January 2008, Andrew D'Angelo was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Here is an extract from the official press release: "like many Americans, Andrew has no health insurance. A fund has been established to help with the costs of his surgery and recovery. Donations can be sent via PayPal at donate@andrewdangelo.com. We deeply appreciate any efforts that can be made to spread the word about Andrew's situation." Profits from the sale of 'Skadra Degis' also go to help covering the costs of the surgery.

(Review by Stef Gijssels (<http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>))

PAUL DUMNALL / NICK STEPHENS / TONY MARSH - *ALL SAID AND DUN*

Label: Loose Torque

Release Date: 2007

Tracklist: Unfinished Pleasure; Walking Back; Coming Round; All Said and Dun

Personnel: Paul Dunmall: tenor sax; Nick Stephens: bass; Tony Marsh: drums

In an online interview with Philip Gibbs from the year 2000, Dunmall has this to say: "I'm not looking to break new ground, I just want to have my own voice and have a great sound, like Dexter Gordon – but used in a free improvisational context. I feel that there are a lot of free players who don't have a great sound, like perhaps most of the more traditional players do, and that's a real drag, it detracts from the music. Freedom in the

music making is great but this shouldn't exclude a certain amount of discipline from the instrumentalist." All fair enough, and Dunmall has produced some very fine playing – notably on his solo bagpipe record (released by FMR in 2003) and in orchestral settings, where he manages to avoid many of the pitfalls that seem to befall so many jazz musicians utilizing that instrumentation.



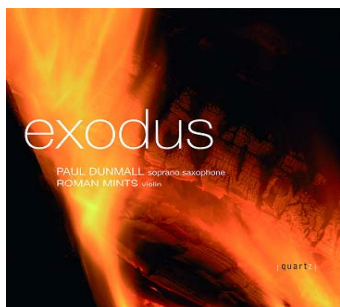
This, too, is a decent CD, and one which will be undoubtedly appreciated by the saxophonist's many fans in the free improv world. And yet, and yet...I feel uncharitable criticizing the work of such a clearly dedicated musician, particularly when it's presented on such a laudable venture as Nick Stephens's Loose Torque record label, but Dunmall sounds like he'd be happier playing in a more explicitly jazz-based context: his playing here lacks the sustained intensity of Coltrane, while frequently echoing his vocabulary (to a greater extent than normal, perhaps because he sticks to tenor).

Stephens and Marsh are both impressive, generally staying more in the background – but, despite what I've said about Dunmall, this is, after all, free improvisation, and so there's obviously a greater level of interaction, particularly between bass and drums. Stephens, in particular, is clearly a very responsive musician, as also indicated by his duo with trumpeter Jon Corbett (as the 'Schizo Quartet'), reviewed elsewhere in this issue – alive to the nuances of a method of music-making in which change could be around every corner, and well able to make the adaptations necessary for continued flow and invention. Dunmall is also capable of demonstrating similar qualities – a particularly nice moment occurs on the closing track, 'All Said and Dun,' which opens with the closing tremolo of 'Coming Round' transposed up, like a thought resumed after a pause, looked at from a slightly different angle.

Committed and sometimes delightful music, then, but can't quite manage to shake off my doubts about Dunmall – for me, his playing lacks that edge, that sense of advancing things, exploring things, furthering things, that I get from a less well-known player, Jason Moritz from the Chris Welcome Quartet. It makes me feel churlish to criticize the record in this way, and I know that there are some who think Dunmall a genius. For me, his bagpipe work is perhaps the most interesting area of his musical explorations, the space where he comes closest to justifying that weighty tag. And, in other contexts he can be much sharper, much less expected – an upcoming duo with violinist Roman Mints, from the clip I have heard, sounds very promising, as does his work with Birmingham-based pianist Mike Hurley – but perhaps one must realize that, in the case of an artist so prolific, obviously not every album is going to be equally good.

(Review by David Grundy)

PAUL DUNMALL/ ROMAN MINTS – *EXODUS*



Label: Quartz

Release Date: July 2008

Tracklist: Exodus I; Exodus II; Exodus III; Exodus IV; Exodus V; Exodus VI

Personnel: Paul Dunmall: soprano saxophone; Roman Mints: violin

Additional Information: Available as CD or MP3 download from the Quartz website (www.quartzmusic.com)

Now this is a very compelling disc of improv. You can't really approach it any other way than on its own terms – it doesn't invite the sort of grandiloquent analogies and metaphors that critics (myself included) are so fond of using. As my listening experience goes at least, it's more evocative of mental than pictorial states. In other words, it deals in states of mind: those of the players, in the narrower sense of what they were thinking/feeling as they played this music in that room, during the time that the improvisations took to unfold, but also in the broader sense of a general method of thought (musical and in a more general sense), a way of approaching situations and dealing with challenges – a way of being creative that is unique to the individual, but also cross-fertilizes so that there is also a kind of shared state of mind. And that state is one that is shared with the listener as well – 'Exodus' is intellectually engaging and has a sense of the mysterious about it that is most appealing (as in the opening of 'Exodus III', where Dunmall's watery questionings hesitantly appear, then disappear, over the almost breathy sustained backdrop of a viola-range violin drone).

As I stated in my review of 'All Said and Dun', it's on tenor that Dunmall's Coltrane tendencies are most pronounced – his soprano owes far less to the reedy, oriental wail of the great man, and is more reminiscent of Evan Parker in its burnished flowing quality, but his use of the instrument is very much his own. Perhaps because Mints is primarily a classical player, this collaboration owes rather less to jazz, again, than the tenor work – though of course jazz does haunt the music, makes itself felt as a ghostly presence guiding fingers over keys and strings, the memory of a be-bop lick turned round and made strange again – so much so that it's hard to see it as a be-bop lick at all.

This is not a combination of instruments you get very often, perhaps because saxophone and violin can sound so similar when played in certain ways. The worry, then, would be that they might cancel each other out. In fact, Dunmall and Mints exploit this crossing-over at various points on the album, creating an eerie illusion that there are more than two musicians playing at the same time. A low saxophone note will be answered by a low violin one, over which the saxophone moves up into a higher register. In fact, such a description sounds is too strictly linear – there's considerable overlap, a blurring of individual lines and tones to produce a duo sound that is both the sum of its parts and more than this. The effect is like a see-saw, but one where both ends manage to be simultaneously up and down at the same time. For such interaction to occur, lightning-quick reactions and a really symbiotic partnership are required – the mark of a successful improvisational partnership. The musicians also delight in making the instruments sound unlike themselves, in making them do things that aren't normally done – such as a passage, towards the end of 'Exodus III', where particularly bizarre soprano over-

blowing, like a mutant duck-call, both combines with, and opposes, scratchy violin. This doesn't last long, and soon they've swept up into high register patterning – never standing still for too long, but with a crucial awareness of the importance of space. Just the right balance, then, and one that is maintained throughout in these peak-level improvisational interactions. **(Review by David Grundy)**

FLOWER/ CORSANO DUO - *THE RADIANT MIRROR* (2006)

Label: Textile Records / **Release Date:** 2006 / **Tracklist:** Earth; Wind; Fire

Personnel: Mike Flower: Japan banjo (shaahi baaja); Chris Corsano: percussion

'The Radiant Mirror' is a couple of years old now, but this is one of those discoveries I felt I just had to share. So it might be surprising to note that I'm not sure how much innate *value* it has in it. One could even argue that it's not very 'good' music. The pieces all have a similar structure: Flower wails away, heavily distorted, until he finds a repetitive, head-nodding figure to repeat into climactic peaks; Corsano bashes away like Elvin Jones, building up in volume and complexity, from single patterns to polyrhythms. In addition, the sound (in terms of both volume level, and general texture) is fairly similar throughout – though it is impressively BIG, and often sounds like several people at once.

And yet, description aside, to actually experience the music as it occurs is for these doubts to be blown aside. It's only in the moment of reflection, after the fact, that doubts enter the picture; to listen is to be utterly convinced by the duo's commitment (at least, for as long as the listening lasts), and entranced, excited, overwhelmed by the music created. Flower's and Corsano's approach is intriguing in the way that it is truly psychedelic, sounding vaguely like a more abstract and eastern-flavoured version of a Jimi Hendrix jam session – yet, and this is the crucial point, taken further out, towards the places that Jimi perhaps would have gone if he's survived. At the same time, it's further in, for, despite the complexity and skill involved in what both men are doing, it focuses on smallness, on repetition, through which, paradoxically opens up a sense of vastness, of space. To fully appreciate it might involve momentarily disregarding the 'critical ear,' but, once that's done, it shouldn't be hard to appreciate this on its own terms, as something gloriously kinetic, gloriously strong, existing for itself, for the moment it creates and inhabits. **(Review by David Grundy)**



KAHIL EL'ZABAR'S RITUAL TRIO FEATURING PHAROAH SANDERS – *OOH LIVE!*

Label: Bright Moments/ Katalyst Entertainment

Release Date: February 2008

Tracklist: Autumn Leaves; In the Land of Ooh!; This Little Light of Mine; Ka's Blues

Personnel: Pharoah Sanders: tenor sax, vocals on 'Ka's Blues'; Ari Brown: piano, tenor sax on 'Ka's Blues'; Malachi Favors: bass; Kahil El' Zabar: drums

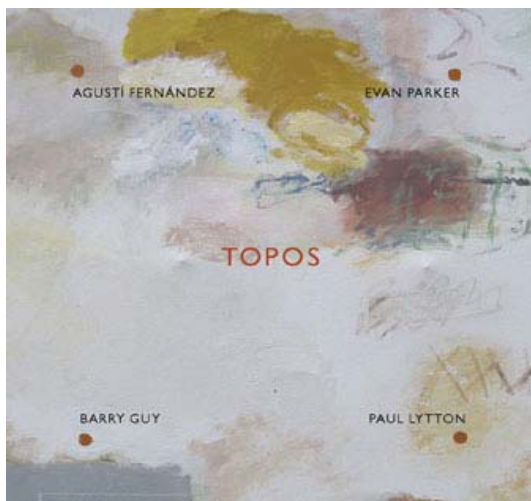
Additional Information: Recorded live at the Hot House, Chicago, 10th September 2000.

Kahil El'Zabar has this magical touch to turn all his music into a pure joy, full of playful spirituality, reverent and fun at the same time. And yes, he tends to repeat himself at times, but who cares when the performances of his Ritual Trio or the Ethnic Heritage Ensemble are always great to excellent? What more can you want? This one is recorded live in 2000, with Ari Brown on piano (predominantly) and sax and the late Malachi Favors on bass, and with special guest Pharoah Sanders.

The album starts with a long piano trio version of "Autumn Leaves", a favorite of El'Zabar and already recorded several times in various live settings. Only on the second track does the great Pharoah make his appearance, first slowly, entering in all quietness, quite bluesy, but as the piece evolves, energy and tension rise, and Sanders becomes really wild, howling, screaming, full of power, opening his soul, pulling the other musicians with him on his sonic journey, and they not only follow suit, but they spur him on to go even further, to go even higher, to go even deeper emotionally, ... and he does! ... and then this monolith of sophisticated and sometimes less sophisticated emotional power calms down, in halts and sputters, still wailing, now singing, then screaming, then back to subdued lyricism, moving into a rhythmic tune, a signal for Brown to start a nice piano solo, with boppish walking bass and El'Zabar's drums in full support.

The third track is again a piano trio, with great bass and drums solos, but without Sanders, and the fourth track brings us back into uptempo blues or boogie land, the enthusiastic crowd shouting out its excitement, with Sanders joining again, on sax and vocals. Throughout the performance El'Zabar sticks to his drumkit, without using his thumb piano, playing much more jazzy and without any direct African musical references as we are used from the Ritual Trio.

The album will not be on my list of preferred Ritual Trio albums, but it is still great fun, with four musicians clearly enjoying themselves, with the second track as an absolute killer. **(Review by Stef Gisjells –<http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)**



**AGUSTI FERNANDEZ / EVAN PARKER
/ BARRY GUY / PAUL LYTTON –
*TOPOS***

Label: Maya Recordings

Release Date: 2007

Tracklist: Coalescence; Open Systems; In Praise of Shadows; Air/Luft; Still Listening; Moon over BCN; Smart Set; This One is for Kowald; Inner Silence

Personnel: Evan Parker: soprano and tenor sax; Agustí Fernández: piano; Barry Guy: bass; Paul Lytton: drums

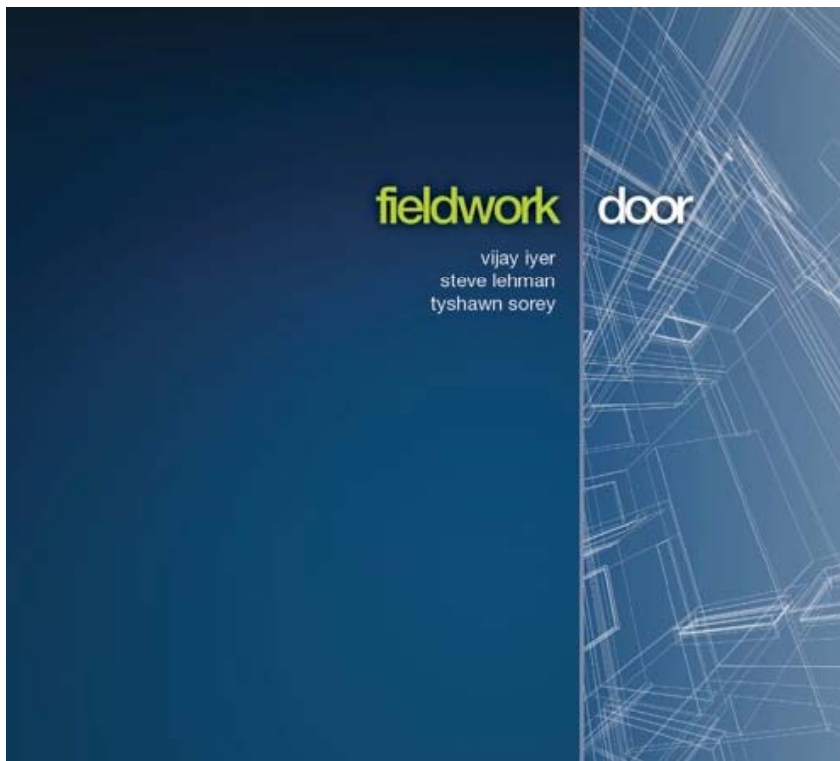
Additional Information: Recorded in Barcelona, March 2006.

In a sense, we know about Parker, Guy and Lytton - and this isn't meant to diminish their abilities in any way - but the real draw on this disc is the pianist, Agustí Fernández. He's been on the scene for a while, but is still, I feel, rather underappreciated. I saw him live with Parker's electro-acoustic ensemble a couple of years ago, where he particularly impressed with a solo that most effectively maintained a balance between the

florid and the ripplingly dramatic. On the recording front, his fascinating duo disc with Marilyn Crispell, 'Dark Night, and Luminous', is over ten years old, and, in recent years, there have been duos with Derek Bailey ('Barcelona') and Mats Gustaffson ('Critical Mass'). Despite all of this activity, it is as a member of Parker's quartet that he's best known, and they suit each other well, Fernandez banishing all memories of Schlippenbach as he dives inside the piano, the better to complement and comment on Parker's soprano wheezing, Lytton's abstract sound scribbles, and Guy's hyperactive flurries of textures and details.

While at times the group seem perhaps too comfortable to let things take their course in almost predictable fashion (most often when Parker gets going on the soprano circular breathing), in general they reassert themselves as the sonic explorers they are, every one of them wired and hyper-alert, darting around silence like an artist constructing his painting around the white of his canvas. This is helped by the varied instrumentation – the disc consists of a series of duos, trios, and quartets, each of them featuring Fernandez. The most impressive track - or, at least, the one that builds up the most sheer propulsive drive - is 'Moon over BCN'. It starts off firmly in 'insect music' territory, Parker screeching then following up with muffled phrases that die away almost as soon as they've begun, Fernandez scratching and plucking on the piano strings, mixed in with all sorts of dribbling and tapping from bass and percussion. Then, about three minutes in, Fernandez picks up on Parker's typically flowing circular patterns with some of his own, the two men combining with devastating force, fading the intensity slightly before ending the piece with just tenor and piano, clicking saxophone keys a ghostly presence haunting this release of controlled energy. **(Review by David Grundy)**

FIELDWORK – *DOOR*



Label: Pi Recordings/ **Release Date:** April 2008

Tracklist: Of; After Meaning; Less; Balanced; Bend; Cycle I; Pivot Point; Pivot Point Redux; Ghost Time; Cycle II; Rai/ **Personnel:** Steve Lehman: saxophone; Vijay Iyer: piano; Tyshawn Sorey: drums.

Progress in music requires progress in our methodologies in writing about music. Certain vocabularies and methods of comparison that were adequate for writing about jazz in the past are no longer efficacious, or desirable.

For one thing, the notion of linear progress and progression in so-called jazz music has been a myth for some time now, as long as 50 plus years depending on who you ask. As the field of influence for improvising musicians continued to widen over time, it made less and less sense to insist upon clear lineages and predecessors. All of this is worth mentioning as an introduction to a review of Fieldwork's new album *Door*, because the music doesn't fit neatly into any preconceived box or precedent, so we have to approach it with a right understanding of methodology in order to convey at least some of its essence.

Fieldwork has had more than one lineup, but as of this writing, the lineup is Vijay Iyer, Steve Lehman, and Tyshawn Sorey. The previous two albums have only Vijay Iyer in common, and the previous release has both Lehman and Iyer - to my ears and understanding, Sorey is a natural progression and fit for the band and its concept, and I hope this lineup stays intact for future efforts. *Door*'s street date is April 22nd, the same day as Vijay Iyer's new quartet record, *Tragicomic*, and Fieldwork is scheduled to play an album release show at Joe's Pub on May 31st.

Door is a truly collaborative effort, with each musician contributing compositions: six by Tyshawn Sorey, three by Vijay Iyer and two by Steve Lehman. The group feel is emphasized no matter the composer, with each musician sharing rhythmic and melodic duties and layered interplay that defies the basic traditional roles of each member's instrument. Sorey and Iyer have a particularly strong rhythmic connection and rapport throughout, with some incredibly tight and telepathic improvisatory passages. As I've come to expect from a certain group of musicians, the line between improvisation and composition is blurred throughout *Door*, reflecting a strong affinity with processual predecessors in the AACM and elsewhere.

It's interesting to note that given the change in lineups for all three of Fieldwork's albums, this recording sounds like a logical continuation of the band's ethos from the past two records. Sorey leaves a distinct mark on the album, both compositionally and with his incredible musicianship. Given Sorey's take-no-prisoners chops and abilities to tackle any rhythm or polyrhythm, his own compositions downplay his own instrumental abilities in favor of examining permutations of themes, and a more minimalist angle than both Iyer and Lehman's writing. Sorey lays down some positively sinister beats and fills throughout the album, summoning John Bonham as often as any other easily identifiable influence. Although I haven't heard it myself, I'm told that the writing here is consistent with what Sorey did on his first solo album *That/Not*, a record that I really need to pick up after hearing his compositions on *Door*.

I'll tell you what Fieldwork is not: it's not your grandpa's jazz, it's not free improvisation, it's not a postmodern hodgepodge or pastiche, and it's not light listening. It's much more difficult to say what exactly it is. It certainly reflects the unique musicality of the three participants, and the singular alchemy that occurs when the three of them come together. There is no shortage of risks taken, and the music reflects this

with occasionally thrilling results. The end product is diverse but coherent, varied but focused. It certainly sounds like the vanguard of the music that I pay attention to, and as such it should come as no surprise that it's on Pi Recordings, a label that continues to put out the most consistently interesting music of any label I can think of.

This is very challenging music - it's an album that in my multiple listens required undivided attention to get a feel for what was going on musically. If that kind of affair is your bag, then you will find Door a highly rewarding collection of music.

(Review by Daniel Melnick)



fURT PLUS – *EQUALS*

Label: PSI

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: Solution A; Solution B; Solution C; Solution D; Solution E; Solution F; Zagreb

Personnel: fURT (Richard Barrett and Paul Obermayer: electronics), in trios with John Butcher: soprano and tenor saxophone; Rhodri Davies: celtic and concert harps; Paul Lovens: percussion; Phil Minton: voice; Wolfgang Mitterer: prepared piano, electronics; Ute Wasserman: voice.

Additional Information: Recorded at the SWR New Jazz Meeting in December 2005.

Why is it with fURT's music that I feel no need to talk of 'influences', whereas, however much I try to curb the urge, it emerges again and again with nearly every jazz CD I listen to? Whatever the reason, it's to fURT's credit that generic considerations are pushed to one side so that one can enjoy a more purely aesthetic experience. This disc consists of more music from the sessions that yielded last year's 'Spin Networks', which focused on larger group configurations. Here, the duo of Barrett and Obermayer are joined in turn by a solo performer (with a final duo track to round things off). But this set-up is never as simple as a 'trio'; because the sampled sounds used by fURT are taken from every single player, it may result in the impression that there is more than one guest. For example, Butcher's saxophone and Lovens' percussion feature prominently in the Wassermann piece, to create an eerie ensemble of the not-there.

This leads one to question what 'instrument' is and what individual 'voice' is. When one can detect an instrument – piano, voice, saxophone, harp – an attempt is made to obscure the normal qualities one would associate with said instrument. Hence, Wolfgang Mitterer and Rhodri Davies' use of preparations, and Butcher, Minton and Wassermann's use of extended techniques, creating a sense of strangeness exacerbated by the unstable electronic sound-world with which they are in dialogue.

When Paul Lovens joins the duo, the music that results is actually less full of rhythmical jolts than the vocal tracks, which are stretched full of plosive pops, belches, whistles, and creaking door roars – not percussion as such, but far more percussive in effects. On John Butcher's piece, it as if fURT has rubbed off on his playing, which merges in so that the acoustic instrument seems just as electronic as the electronics themselves (and we must also note that acoustic samples are being used, so it cuts both ways). And yet, in this context, the saxophone can sound comfortingly human, inhabiting

area of human/ alien, breath/machine overlap that these types of recordings explore. Using arguably the two best improv vocalists around foregrounds these concerns all the more, giving license to create and explore sounds far beyond the reach of the traditional singing voice.

It all risks being too much to handle, too much for one to relate to – but there are also moments which really hit home, in which it is uncomfortable to stay for a long time. Because this is most definitely uncomfortable music, direct, sometimes even ugly, at the same time as being intellectually gripping. And yet, despite all the complexity, some of the simplest moments are also the most effective (or at least, the most memorable), as in the Wassermann piece, where a repeating, almost vehement rhythm gives way to a doomy sounds over which Wassermann lets out a sort of demonic toad-belch, before a conclusion with the semblance of chiming bells.

Another notable example would be the extraordinary intrusion (inclusion) of a tonal section in the Wolfgang Mitterer trio, where a loop leads to mournful, almost ambient two-note piano alternations, as other sounds squiggle around it, assault it, clamour for attention – electronic piano samples, the chatter of disembodied voices, percussive clicks and clangs. On reflection, it's probably the least successful section of the disc, as it reduces the extraordinary sound barrage to some sort of gimmicky accompaniment to the piano line. But the equivalent moments on the other tracks are a lot more integrated, less fore-grounded. Each piece reaches what I'd term an 'ecstatic point' (though Mr Barrett and Mr Obermayer would probably strongly disagree with my introduction of such emotionally-coloured description), where an idea is repeated by the guest instrumentalist/vocalist (as in the droney sounds at the end of Butcher's appearance).

At times it can feel that the music is haunted by a manic fear of repetition: there's a constant feel of overload, often with three or more directions going at once, always changing, never stopping. Do you pick one track to follow or try and follow all of them at once and risk becoming lost, without a direction to lead you through the dense unfolding textures? It's a similar dilemma to that faced by us all in western societies today. The twenty-first century is an age of greater complexity than ever before; a technological world; a world in which information comes at us from every quarter, only fragments of which can be taken in. Obliquely, fURT's music seems to try and formulate an answer to the question of how art should respond to these challenges, these changing conditions. This is perhaps dealt with even more explicitly on 'Equals' than on 'Spin Networks,' and, as such, it's more forbidding, but perhaps even more thought-provoking. I mean it when I say that this is some of the very best music being created today.

(Review by David Grundy)

VIJAY IYER – *TRAGICOMIC*

Label: Pi Recordings/

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: The Weight of Things; Macaca Please; Aftermath; Comin' Up; Without Lions; Mehndi; Age of Everything; Window Text; I'm All Smiles; Machine Days; Threnody; Becoming.

Personnel: Vijay Iyer: piano; Rudresh Mahanthappa: alto saxophone; Stephan Crump: bass; Marcus Gilmore: drums.



Vijay Iyer's *Tragicomic* opens with an invocation entitled 'The Weight of Things', an evocative title and opening to the album to my mind and ears. There's a series of titles about *things* amongst musicians I admire: 'Evidence of Things Unseen' by Don Pullen, 'The Flow of Things' by Roscoe Mitchell, 'Things to Come From Those Now Gone' by Muhal Richard Abrams, to name a few. Maybe I'm reading too much into these *things*, but I see a connected interest in the ineffable amongst all these artists, and a similar view of expressing these *things* through music.

Now that I've already gone and described the opening track as evocative, I'll go ahead and apply the label to the whole album. Isn't all good music evocative in some sense? Perhaps, but this music falls into a category of evocation that I deem particularly noteworthy. *Tragicomic* finds Vijay Iyer splitting time between his established quartet and a more stripped down setting of the trio, and there is even one track treating the listener to a solo piano excursion that is so enjoyable that I hope Vijay will consider recording an album of solo piano at some point.

I did something with *Tragicomic* that I like to do if I'm afforded the luxury of time - listen to the artist's recordings leading up to the newest (this is just his music under his own name as a leader, not including collaborative efforts such as *Fieldwork*). Following the progression of Mr. Iyer's work throughout his career, I am definitely hearing a honing of process and compositional voice. It's difficult to describe, but amounts to an identifying of some kind of essential string of musical voice that you can easily hear throughout that becomes more prominent in improvisations and composition as time goes on.

There is an aesthetic in Vijay Iyer's music that I'd described as eclectic unity, the incorporation of seemingly disparate elements rhythmically, melodically or harmonically that make sense in the context of the whole. We hear hints of reggae in 'Comin' Up' both in feel and in a subtle delay (a production technique that recurs a few times on the album with great success to my ears) on the snare drum at a dub like break, a confident sense of swing in his solo piano excursion, and a whole lot more that isn't easily labeled.

An accepted fact to my ears when listening to and parsing Vijay Iyer's music is that rhythm is always a centrally propulsive element in the music. Propulsive not always in the sense of frenetic or pushed, but more in a sense of centrality in its role in the music as a whole. Even in 'Mehndi,' the brooding meditative piece that places the listener awash in the ceremonial dye of its namesake, the rhythmic feel and pulse is very precise and most of all purposeful. In this realm of rhythmic prowess, no genre is off limits, and new genres are formed through rhythmic alchemy.

Tragicomic is a great album. Vijay Iyer has continued to hone his musical vision and it is fully formed on this release. To speculate a bit, I hear a point of inflection with this album that I think is going to lead to new and different things in future releases with this or other bands. The concept and vision is there and now the question is what will he do with it next? **(Review by Daniel Melnick)**

ILTON JN - *THE RATS RAIN DOWN*



Label: Clinical Archives

Release Date:

Tracklist: Perseverance is Useless; Tenebrae; Obselitism; Laxx; The Somerset Yeomanry; Beyond the Night

Personnel: Ilton JN: electornics

Additional Information: Released on the Clinical Archives netlabel, and available as a free MP3 download (with artwork) from their website - address - or from archive.org.

The glitch has become part of the vocabulary of electronic music, providing a certain amount of 'dirtiness' in even its quite mainstream forms, Ilton JN here reminds us how unsettling and unbalancing a device it can be.

The artist himself claims that, in these improvised pieces, he is trying to use electronics in a similar manner to Derek Bailey's guitar. Certainly, there's a similar sense of dislocation, of a deliberate avoidance of easy development, the constant appearance of new ideas, new events that, more often and not, do not seem to logically connect with the ones preceding them. The opener, 'Perseverance is Useless', is hard to listen to, even for a seasoned experimental music buff, what with its unpredictable bursts of what sound like very small snippets of a sampled track. The music isn't allowed to settle into either silence or noise - thus, however difficult the approaches of, say, Merzbow or Axel Dorner (to represent the noise/silence polarity), at least they tend to focus more on that - this doesn't do that, it doesn't allow the listener to settle down, it hovers on the brink constantly. Perhaps that's a good thing.

Track 2, 'Tenebrae', deals in booming sounds, at first suggesting an ambient direction, but soon sounding more like music to an experimental horror film, with various glitches leaping up like half-glimpsed beasts from the sonic cavern before things stutter out in what sound like waves breaking, interrupted by silence.

'Obselitism' is more rhythmic, moving at a slightly-faster-than-pulse-rate and, again, various squelches pop up in seemingly random order on both stereo channels, creating a feel of unsettling uncertainty. What strikes me is that, while someone like Eddie Prevost can be ideologically opposed to the idea of repetition as fundamentally opposed to the ideals of improvised music, Ilton JN is approaching what can often be a beat-based music (and the glitch tends to be a rhythmic device, however stuttering and awkward) in a way that renders what comes out not in the least predictable.

'Laxx' builds on a bassy sample, gradually bringing in fragments of what sound like strings, or a string synth patch, and ends up resembling a glitchy version of Autechre's ambient tracks. 'The Somerset Yeomanry' opens with the spoken word reminiscence of a soldier. Treated fragments of his voice, transformed into mocking chirrup (perhaps the voices of the titular raining rats), build up into electronic clouds that threaten to overwhelm the words, and periodically do so, before hushing and allowing them to be heard. All the while, a barely audible bass (base) drone adds a menacing air to

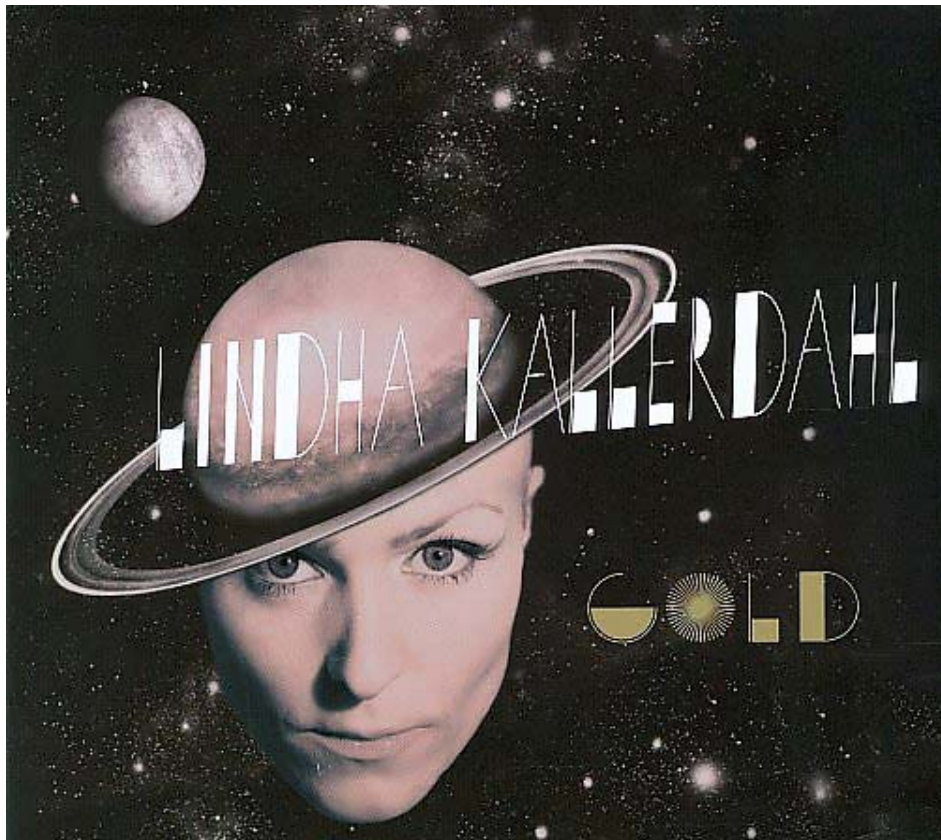
things. As the anecdote takes a darker tone - "the devastation in the town was something I'd never imagined, or could have imagined; the whole streets were blown to pieces..." – JN brings in bursts of machine-gun rat-a-tat and radio fuzz which at once add appropriate atmosphere and seem to mock this devastation – unknown, inhuman forces which are, at best, indifferent to, and, at worst, amused by the suffering. Thus, there's no melodramatic close. Horror is dealt with in a way that is much more disturbing – it is greeted with indifference.

'Beyond the Night' opens in a much minimal manner, and, though at moments it builds in volume and intensity, it never reaches the peak desired. Of course, the artist is not the one who 'desires' this peak; and what he's doing might be a more interesting way of creating intensity. Certainly, it is an unusual one: a constant tension, a defeat of expectations that lovers of improv should welcome.

And yet, the overall effect is, more so than the music of Autechre (which is often criticized for the same thing), 'inhuman', cold and robotic. It's music with no obvious emotional pull, as suggested by the title 'Perseverance is Useless'. This is the point, of course. But it does make it goddamn hard to engage with - it doesn't overwhelm you like noise music, or you draw you into a more concentrated, hushed state of concentrated being like reductionism/ eai. It exists on margins. Still, it's fascinating work, and this sort of challenging listen is always welcome. So, it would be well worth your time to pop over to the clinical archives website and grab this as a free download.

(Review by David Grundy)

LINDHA KALLERDAHL – *GOLD*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: April 2008

Tracks: A King; Body and Soul; Gold; Doj; Gold Arrow; Balga; Ori; Jean-Loui; Bless; All of Me; Beautiful Love; Hawai; June; Raw; Alice; Blue-Eye; Midnight Express.

Personnel: Linda Kallerdahl: voice, piano, organ.

ESP is a label associated firmly with the 1960s free-jazz scene, a position cemented by an extensive reissues programme undertaken in recent years, but Bernard Stollman has also begun recording new artists, one of whom is Swedish singer Kallerdahl. In some ways, this pushes the re-issues for sheer emotional power, and for sheer oddness too. An acquired taste, it took me a few listens to really appreciate it, but, once it 'clicked' for me, it *really* clicked.

Like a more extreme, jazz version of Bjork, Kallerdahl's voice seems to be perpetually straining at extreme emotional registers, from hyper tension or despair to quiet moments of peace, all the more precious and beautiful for being hard won. Her piano work is unfussy and contributes greatly to the mood, serving to complement her voice with simple riffs or chord shadings. The best example is on the record's most jazzy track, a version of the standard 'Beautiful Love', which is rendered at once playful, fragile, and just that little bit unstable: witness the little swoops she inserts into the melody, or the slightly off-key dissonances in the piano part, or the mad scat (is that scat? I don't really know what else to call it...) near the end, alternating between sharp plosive spitting and rolling and the screaming out of nonsense syllables. She gives back to jazz singing what it so often seems to lack - a sense that what's being sung really *means* something. It's a long way from what 'jazz singer' can sadly seem to mean nowadays: a lounge act singing Cole Porter.

In fact, to call her a jazz singer gives completely the wrong impression: Kallerdahl often resembles a coloratura soprano, and the emotional pitch is raised to operatic levels. The short tracks each enact miniature musical dramas rather than coasting along, content with creating a pleasantly relaxing or melancholy mood.

Perhaps there's something a little melodramatic about it, and there are times when Kallerdahl sounds slightly uncomfortable singing in English - the passages where she sings in Swedish flow much more easily off her tongue, as do the wordless vocalized sections. But most importantly, it's not music that allows you to remain in your comfort zone. At times she reaches uncomfortably loud and high pitches, and holds them - both a formidable technical feat in itself, and something that really works on the listener, that forces them to either engage or reach for the 'off' button. Hard to feel ambivalent about such strong stuff.

Another danger is that sometimes present in the work of avant-garde vocalists - a feeling of gimmickry, through the use of devices such the orgasmic scream, the strangled gasp, and so on - but Kallerdahl avoids this, for the most part. The track that comes closest is the closer, 'Midnight Express', which is essentially an effects piece, imitating the sound of a train, but otherwise, the experimentation pays off, as on 'Ori-Ori', which adds a little studio reverb, to great effect.

Some of the best tracks are for solo voice. 'Raw' occupies exactly the space that its title suggests, although it ends with a figure that recalls the Bach/Gounoud 'Ave Maria' - but this has nothing in common with Bobby McFerrin's treatment of said work, which feels like a showpiece. Meanwhile, I venture to suggest that 'Blue-eye' is a perfect track,

mesmerizing for its short life-span of 1 minute and 47 seconds, as it delivers an emotional journey in under two minutes.

A short piece, on a short record; it's just over half-an-hour long, but there are 17 tracks, so there's a lot of variety. Kallerdahl takes up no more space than necessary, though that doesn't mean the tracks are cluttered - often, there are long pauses and slow tempi. She knows not to outstay her welcome, and in the process delivers one of the best jazz vocal albums I've heard. **(Review by David Grundy)**



**DAVE LIEBMAN/ ELLERY ESKELIN/
TONY MARINO/ JIM BLACK –
RENEWAL**

Label: Hat Hut

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: Cha; The Decider; Out There (Tk. 2); Renewal; Palpable Clock; Dimi and the Blue Man; IC; Free Ballad; Out There (Tk. 1)

Personnel: Dave Liebman: tenor saxophone (left channel), Ellery Eskelin: tenor saxophone (right channel); Tony Marino: bass; Jim Black: drums and percussion

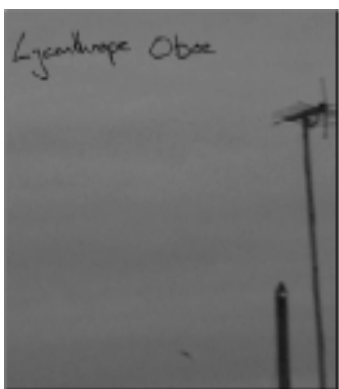
Dave Liebman seems to have been in 'free mode' recently: first taking part in an unlikely performance with British improv veteran Evan Parker at London's Vortex, and now finding himself alongside another free tenor player, Ellery Eskelin. The encounter with Parker, broadcast on British radio but not, as far as I know, recorded for album release, was, admittedly, not much of a success: Liebman's post-Coltrane vocabulary drew out that side of Parker as well, and the music consequently occupied a somewhat uneasy place which was never really very adventurous, despite being loud and propulsive throughout. Here, though, things are different. Despite the two-sax line (Liebman perhaps feeling he can't go far enough 'out' on his own, so needs a freer player to spur on him), the feel is not so much that of the sax 'duel' as a relationship of mutual building. The rhythm section is very tight, but not as glibly 'funky' as seems to be the tendency nowadays - they impart a real urgency to the music. Perhaps the best example of this comes at the end of the first track, 'Cha' (written by drummer Jim Black), in which bass and drums seem to be carried on by their own continuing momentum and play on for another thirty seconds after the horns have finished. Like a lot of the album, it feels at once spontaneous and carefully organized; there's a careful balance between the freer and jazzier elements.

In general, this is, I suppose, what Liebman attempts to do with his playing (though with how much success is a matter for debate). His comments in a 2004 interview for American website All About Jazz reveal his angle on things: "I like to delve in and out of a lot of things, rhythmically and harmonically. I like the line between the in and the out and the up and the down. I just like yin and yang stuff, you know, floating between the two...I like art that goes between very abstract and very inside and then keeps the listener or the person who is the receiver, I think, curious. I like to see stuff that makes me think, "What are they going to do next?" I know what people like about me

and I can go there in a minute and I will go there, but I also have to remember that I have to go where I don't know."

What's most interesting about this album is when Liebman goes where he "doesn't know", as when he begins to explore a different lineage from that of Coltrane. The lack of a keyboard instrument helps – harmonically, things can be a little looser, as on the breathy meanderings of 'Free Ballad', with Marino and Black's support at times hinting at the interactive rhythm/horns relationship of Ornette Coleman's early groups. On 'IC', meanwhile, the solos, if not the theme, occasionally take on a Dolphyian, register-leaping/swooping tinge, so it's appropriate that the band also include two attempts on one of Dolphy's compositions, 'Out There'. Like Dolphy's, this music is situated somewhere between the mainstream and less recognizable waters, which is always an interesting place to be. Fine stuff.

(Review by David Grundy)



LYCANTHROPE OBOE – *HIDING IN THE LONG GRASS/ STARING AT THE WAKING SKY*

Label: Petula Records

Release Date: 2006

Tracklist: And truly the wolves have an easy prey; the building are wreathed in a cold amber haze; of sleep and sickness; A light buzzing in the rain

Personnel: Jacken Waters (Lycanthrope Oboe): electric and acoustic guitars, ebow, radio.

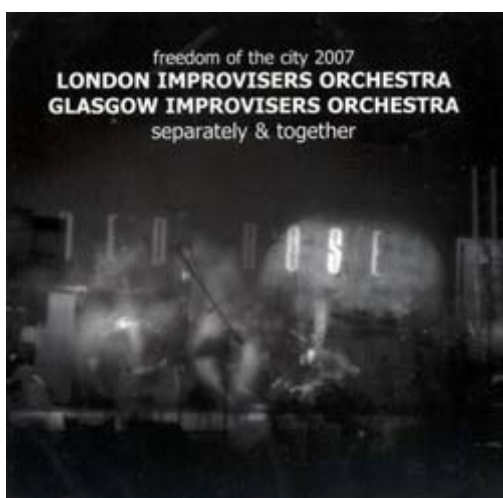
Additional Information: Available for free download, or as a CD-R on request. For more details, go to www.soundclick.com/lycanthropeoboe.

Lycanthrope Oboe is the solo project of Hereford-based guitarist Jacken Waters (also a member of the bands Desdemona Lives and Sleepwalk Something). The music he creates tends to be centred around the use of layered, manipulated guitar, slowly building up washes of sound which increase in volume, then fade back to silence, while single, simple, repeating riffs provide an anchor for the sonic driftage. To date, Waters has produced two CD-R albums under the Lycanthrope moniker, which are also available as free internet downloads.

Live, as opposed to on record, he's a somewhat different prospect – obviously, there's less possibility for overdubbing and post-improvisational tweaking, and hence he concentrates on sound and noise rather than on the intricate interweaving of different melodic layers, or fragments. Because of this, I'd venture to suggest that 'Hiding in the Long Grass/ Staring at the Waking Sky' is a little easier on the ear than the live work – but that doesn't make it any less effective. Poised somewhere between a quiet ecstasy and a brooding melancholy, the music is simple in conception (or construction), rising from gentle, strummed guitar figures to peaks of overdubbed lines and swooshing, stereo-switching radio static and electric guitar feedback/ drone; audibly a part of the lo-fi/ DIY aesthetic, but with something of a sheen to it that makes it very easy to listen to. Things are frequently taken down to a bare minimum – as on the opener, 'And truly the wolves have an easy prey,' where the sort of chord structure that might underpin your two-a-penny pop song forms the basis of the entire piece, its repetition gradually subsumed by the rising drone haze, before it re-emerges in a return to the simple clarity of the opening.

While I'd always hesitate to apply overtly programmatic designs onto music (particularly in the drone genre, where so much of the appeal is based on the abstraction, the open-endedness, the active role of the listener in bringing to the sounds what they will), it does seem singularly appropriate that, through song titles, cover art, and general aesthetic, a somewhat whimsical, folky, nature-focused aesthetic emerges. Not the first thing you'd connect this with, but, for me, it has something of the same appeal as John Surman's recent 'The Spaces in Between' (although, given Waters' anarchist political beliefs, his rural vision is likely to be a bit idyllic than Surman's). Perhaps a rather more subjective response than usual, then, in this review: perhaps not. Either way, I'd definitely recommend this music. **(Review by David Grundy)**

LONDON IMPROVISERS ORCHESTRA / GLASGOW IMPROVISERS ORCHESTRA – *SEPARATELY AND TOGETHER*



Label: Emanem Records

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: Impro Intro; On the Point of Influence; PW to AW; Study for Oppy Wood; AW to AB; Hive Life; Too late, too late, it's ever so late; Seven Sisters (for Barry Guy); Stagione; Big ideas, images and distorted facts; 811 Joint Response; 1 + 1 = Different; Outlaw.

Personnel: London Improvisers' Orchestra: Harry Beckett, Roland Ramanan, Ian Smith: trumpet; Robert Jarvis: trombone; Catherine Pluygers: oboe; Terry Day: bamboo flutes; John Rangelcroft: clarinet; Chefa Alonso, Lol Coxhill, Adrian Northover: soprano saxophone; Caroline Kraabel: alto saxophone; Evan Parker: tenor saxophone; Alison Blunt, Susanna Ferrar, Sylvia Hallett, Philipp Wachsmann: violin; Ivor Kallin, violin, viola; Hannah Marshall, Marcio Mattos, Barbara Meyer: cello;

Dominic Lash, David Leahy: double bass; John Bisset, Dave Tucker: electric guitar; Veryan Weston: piano; Jackie Walduck: vibraphone; Javier Carmona: percussion.

Glasgow Improvisers' Orchestra: Aileen Campbell; voice; Matthew Cairns, trumpet; Robert Henderson, trumpet; George Murray, trombone; Emma Roche, flute; Matthew Studdert-Kennedy, flute; John Burgess, bass clarinet; Raymond MacDonald, alto saxophone; Graeme Wilson, baritone saxophone; Peter Nicholson, cello; Una MacGlone, double bass; Armin Sturm, double bass; George Burt, guitar; Neil Davidson, electric guitar; Chris Hladowski, bouzouki; Rick Bamford, Stuart Brown: percussion.

Additional Information: Recorded live at the Red Rose, Finsbury Park, London, as part of the 2007 Freedom of the City festival.

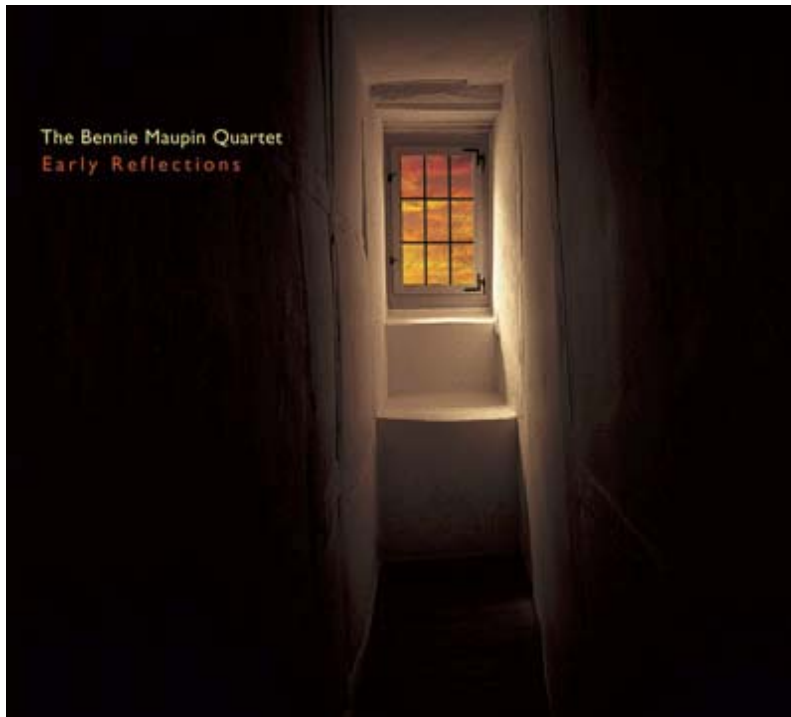
The improvising orchestra is a tricky proposition. A balance has to be found between settling too easily into steady grooves that everyone can easily slot into and tentatively noodle around, and having complete anarchy on one's hands: a muddy musical mess. Hence the frequent use of some sort of framework, as seen in pieces by Barry Guy or Simon H. Fell, or the 'conduction' of Butch Morris and the 'soundpainting' of Walter Thompson. The role of this individual would seem, then, to be vital: a 'sound organiser' who can allow a piece to develop in adventurous way, without the musicians feeling they have to compromise, or tone down their approach, to avoid chaos.

David Leahy, in his liner notes, approaches it from a different perspective, posing the question: "What is the role of a conductor with a group of talented improvising musicians, who have more than enough experience to not need someone in front of them

telling them what to do?” And, to be honest, it is often hard to tell whether the music is being conducted or improvised. The first disc focuses a little more on the dramatic, theatrical side of things, seen most notably in Terry Day’s ‘Too Late, Too Late, It’s Ever so Late’, one of his spoken word pieces, themed around the negative role of humans in relation to climate change. The second is more concerned with the music as music: the creation and solution of problems, the appearance and disappearance of different ideas, the evolution of varying collective textures (as one might expect from an orchestra of this size, the focus is more on this collective sound than on the individual musicians, fine soloists though most of them are).

So much is happening here that I don’t feel I’ve fully grasped it enough to make any analysis more detailed than the above – and that’s perhaps not my role. I wouldn’t want to spoil any surprises or future pleasures that these discs have to offer– because this is as much a journey of discovery for the listener as it must have been for the performers. Or, as Massimo Ricci puts it in his review of the album for ‘Touching Extremes’, “these materials demand a lot from the players but especially from the audience. A single listen won’t do it - a minimum of five is required before starting to understand at least the basic connections.” **(Review by David Grundy)**

THE BENNIE MAUPIN QUARTET – *EARLY REFLECTIONS*



Label: Cryptogramophone

Release Date: April 2008

Tracklist: Within Reach; Escondido; Inside the Shadows; ATMA; Ours Again; The Jewel in the Lotus; Black Ice; Tears; Not Later Than Now; Early Reflections; Inner Sky; Prophet's Motifs; Spirits of the Tatra.

Personnel: Bennie Maupin: bass clarinet, tenor and soprano saxophones, alto flute; Michal Tokaj: piano; Michal Baranski: bass; Lukasz Zyta: drums, percussion; Hania Chowaniec-Rybka: voice (4, 13).

Bennie Maupin! The name strikes fear in the hearts of those who knew him as a foil to Miles Davis on *Bitches Brew* and *On The Corner*, a companion to Herbie Hancock throughout the 1970s, and as a powerful musician wielding a mighty bass clarinet in addition to flute and other reeds. You might not have his 1974 release as a leader, *The Jewel In The Lotus*, but when you hear the name Bennie Maupin it conjures aural imagery of digging deep in a funk riff, freaking out over synthesized keyboards and electrifying drum grooves.

If you did hear his 1974 release, you might have realized that while Bennie Maupin certainly could play that dirty electrifying funk, it wasn't necessarily the vibe of his own music. *Jewel In The Lotus* reflected a different aesthetic, and Maupin obviously had his own sense of direction and purpose in his music (incidentally, *Jewel In The Lotus* finally made it to CD). If you need more convincing, with their usual vision and foresight *Destination: Out* (<http://destination-out.com>) was on the scene before the CD reissue to tell you why *Jewel In The Lotus* is a gem.

After a lengthy hiatus from recording as a leader, Bennie Maupin rose from the ashes to record *Driving While Black* in 1998, and then 8 years later in 2006 recorded a fantastic album for Cryptogramophone, *Penumbra*. Only two years later, a quick turnaround in the context of Maupin's career as a leader, we now have *Early Reflections*, an album featuring Maupin and a trio of Polish musicians. It's a very different affair than *Penumbra* was, but equally rewarding to my ears.

The title and cover art of the album are appropriate: this is early morning music, reflective, contemplative, shaking off sleep and greeting the sun music. That's not to say that it doesn't reach energetic musical heights, but it takes its time getting there, with the patience of sunrise. Maupin is joined by three Polish musicians who have been his touring ensemble for the past two years, all young players who he met while doing some of his own studies in Poland.

Early Reflections is a striking album - carefully composed, no wasted notes or excess, sensitive dynamics and a clear musical vision. It achieves all of this without becoming wallpaper music, dinner music, or coffee shop music. It's far more stirring and purposeful than the album Maupin's old comrade Herbie Hancock recently won a Grammy for. It is what it is, to spin a tautological truism, and it is a largely meditative affair with some flourishes and flairs that provide the necessary contrast to make it all worthwhile. Maupin squeezes every ounce out of the CD format, packing in 76 minutes of music that alters the space time continuum in the way only good music can.

(Review by Daniel Melnick)

MERZBOW– *HERE*



Label: L. White Records
Release Date: January 2007

Tracklist: Here; Torikabuto; Pigeon Car
Personnel: Masami Akita (Merzbow): electronics

Additional Information: Released in a limited edition of 500 copies (digi-pack).

I guess this is what you might call 'standard' Merzbow – somehow, quality judgments are just one of the many things that are thrown into doubt by Masami Akita's output (this latest release was apparently recorded in his Tokyo Bedroom last year). In a sense, many of his releases are interchangeable, which could be construed as a protest against the perceived need to arrest the natural flow of things, to see each album as a separate product rather than as part of an ongoing creation.

But what's the effect of the music itself? On listening to 'Here', I was struck by how noise music, Merzbow's in particular, has immense physicality at the same time as (presumably non-physical) 'inhumanity'. An unlikely way of getting some sort of theoretical grip on my vague thoughts was afforded by reading Peter De Bolla's book on aesthetics, 'Art Matters.' De Bolla argues that the paintings of Barnett Newman make the viewer define him/herself in relation to them, blurring the boundaries between the observer and the observed, blurring the human's sense of being a separate, individual self (at the same time as reminding one that aesthetic experience is very much an individual thing). In other words, what happens when looking at a Barnett Newman is not simply a process in which one remains separate from the artwork, but a more symbiotic occurrence.

In both Newman's and Merzbow's case, that effect is created by overwhelming the viewer – Newman with serene colour and scale, Merzbow with 'transgressive' noise and volume. Perhaps the music is even more effective at insinuating itself into one's being, sounds having physical correspondences that are not necessarily cast-iron, and may rather be catalysts as much as equivalent metaphors. Thus, the rough drone equates to a frantic heartbeat, and the quipping zips that overlay it to a pulse, while the high-pitched whine and white noise seems to be produced by the ears rather than the CD player. It's disturbing – the music seems to possess one, to come from oneself even if one has not willed this – yet, oddly enough, there's a kind of serenity to be found here too. The title, 'here' is appropriate: forcing one to (consciously or unconsciously) consider the 'hereness' of being in/with the music. **(Review by David Grundy)**

EVAN PARKER/ TRANSATLANTIC ART ENSEMBLE – *BOUSTROPHEDON*

Evan Parker **Boustrophedon** Transatlantic Art Ensemble



Label: ECM

Release Date:

Tracklist: Overture; Furrow 1; Furrow 2; Furrow 3; 4; Furrow 5; Furrow 6; Finale

Personnel: Evan Parker: soprano saxophone; Roscoe Mitchell: alto and soprano saxophone; Anders Svanoe: alto saxophone; John Rangecroft: clarinet; Neil Metcalfe: flute; Corey Wilkes: trumpet, flugelhorn; Nils Bultmann: viola; Philipp Wachsmann: violin; Marcio Mattos: cello; Craig Taborn: piano; Jaribu Shahid: double-bass; Barry Guy: double-bass; Tani Tabbal: drums, percussion, Paul Lytton: drums, percussion.

Evan Parker's certainly modified his views from those days when, while not quite arguing that there was a binary opposition between composition and improvisation, he definitely favoured the latter over the former. Now, he's written a new, partially-composed work – and while it's true that the cast is packed with leading European and American improvisers, and improvisation plays a key role, arguably giving the piece its substance, those used to his freely improvised performances on tenor and soprano saxophone will be in for surprise at the kinds of musical strategies and the musical language that is generally adopted. It's not often, for instance, that you hear a Parker album which features jazz-inflected soloing over repeating rhythm section riffs, or written passages that at times recall European folk music, at others, the work of the 'Third Stream' composers.

The brief overture opens with the staggered entry of different instruments playing the same (or very similar) melodic fragments, before the appearance of another device frequently used on this disc: a dramatic tutti chord, followed by a pause, and then the re-utterance of that chord for added dramatic effect. This alternating pattern, between apartness and togetherness, soloist and ensemble, the written and the composed, is a key feature of 'Boustrophedon'. Dislocation abounds – though never the sort of disintegration you might expect. In fact, things on the whole can seem rather muted: that is, if you discount the solos by the more jazz-based musicians, such as Roscoe Mitchell or trumpeter Corey Wilkes (who provides a yelping, brassy conclusion to 'Furrow 4' which is particularly effective). Also note-worthy is the mechanistic repeating piano figure that crops up in 'Furrow 5', alternating with dark-hued bass duets and speeding up every time it re-appears, in a manner that creates a real sense of dramatic intensity.

What is most surprising about the work is the way that Parker seems to have deliberately backgrounded himself as performer, taking only one solo on the entire record (during the opening five minutes of 'Furrow 6'). Indeed, during the finale, everyone in turn gets a solo apart from him. This means that attention is focused, firstly on the textures he creates as composer/ conductor, and then on the capable bunch of improvisers he's gathered. Things are intriguing, but I can't help feeling some sort of loss from the improvised language he normally uses. Thus, it's the track on which he appears that is my favourite, the dark string backing underneath his trademark swirling notes giving them a real emotional tilt that's not the first thing you'd associate with his playing, and encouraging him into some heartfelt slurs that add a whole new dimension, while not compromising his position. That's followed by Roscoe Mitchell's more (free) jazz-inflected, and more questing solo, over a piano vamp from Craig Taborn that somehow feels rather disappointing – not the sort of thing you expect to hear on an Evan Parker record – too much of a comfort-bed, surely?

One could argue that Parker is an improviser – he's *supposed* to defy expectations, and that, in effect, should be his whole ethos, the *raison d'être* of the music he's been involved in for decades. Perhaps, in adopting a writing style that occasionally nods, as with this piano vamp, towards more conventional musical methodologies, he is actually challenging himself more so than if he chose to create an aleatoric, Cage-ian strategy. Yet, while I can see where such an analysis would be coming from, I still believe that there is enough to surprise and challenge in the numerous other contexts in which he finds himself – and, perhaps even more so, in those contexts which he has been working for years (such as the Schlippenbach Trio, where, as he's noted, new

possibilities for almost telepathic communication opens up, due to intense the three men's familiarity with each other's playing. Thus, those seeking to hear Parker at his best, his most exploratory, would actually be advised to hear him in the more 'familiar' context of the Schlippenbach Trio's latest album 'Gold is Where You Find It', or his work with another pianist, Agusti Fernandez, on 'Topos', released on Barry Guy's Maya record label. I applaud the endeavor here, and parts of it are very effective, suggest interesting new directions for Parker as composer, but I rather feel that the strategies he is working on in other contexts offer more possibilities. Parker fans will want to hear this, as will fans of creative music in general, and there are many enjoyable moments, but, as with this disc's companion piece, Roscoe Mitchell's 'Composition/ Improvisation, Nos. 1, 2 & 3', it's not as good as it could have been.

(Review by David Grundy)

THE SCHIZO QUARTET – *DON'T ANSWER IT*



Label: Loose Torque

Release Date:

Tracklist: Loose Talk; Why So Blue?; Don't Answer It (A) You Three are a Right Pair (B) If Ever There was One; Sunday Meeting; That Reminds Me; In Vino Veritas; Smoking Room; Happiness is a Warm Zippo

Personnel: Jon Corbett: trumpet; Nick Stephens: double bass.

For an improv disc, this is quite a light-hearted affair, but that's not to suggest that the Stevens' and Corbett's approach is in any way overly comfortable or slapdash – just nicely relaxed in feel. Both musicians are full of quick reflexes, melodic inventiveness, and a sharp control of musical movement, and this ensures that things are always interesting, as well as allowing for occasional serendipitous moments which, almost by accident, capture something perfectly – a quick half-glimpsed image for the ear, and then it's gone.

In essence, 'Don't Answer It' is a series of musical conversations, the players constantly complimenting and complementing one another, as on 'Loose Talk', where Corbett dashes off a quick dash for the upper register before landing back down with a huffy growl, while Stevens bows his bass inquisitively, then introduces a bluesy walking phrase over which some more leisurely, melodic trumpet lines can unfold. Of course, within a matter of seconds, they're off on another tack, though the transitions are seamless. It all unfolds with delicious logic, though with a slightly manic side which raises more smiles than it does frowns. Sensibly audacious is how I might put it best.

The album gets its title, by the way, from a moment when a distant phone rings, Stephens carrying on unperturbed as he barks out “Don’t answer it!” I’m not sure whether it was inserted afterwards as a jokey accoutrement, or whether it really happened during recording, but, either way, it just about sums up the spirit of these sixty-one minutes of joyous invention – concentrated on the controlled present moment but allowing for the unexpected future flash of inspiration.

(Review by David Grundy)

WADADA LEO SMITH’S GOLDEN QUARTET – *TABLIGH*



Label: Cuneiform

Release Date: July 2008

Tracklist: Rosa Parks; DeJohnette; Caravan of Winter; Tabligh

Personnel: Wadada Leo Smith: trumpet; Vijay Iyer: piano, Fender Rhodes, synthesizer; John Lindberg: bass; Ronald Shannon Jackson: drums

Trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith has always been one of my favorite musicians, and that is confirmed again by the new release of his Golden Quartet, which consists of an entirely new line-up. Anthony Davis, Malachi Favors and Jack DeJohnette having been replaced by Vijay Iyer on piano and Fender Rhodes, John Lindberg on bass and Ronald Shannon Jackson on drums. The new musicians are of course not comparable to the former band, and that is easy to notice. It's the same high quality, but the approach is different. And Vijay Iyer and John Lindberg are also among my favorite musicians of the moment.

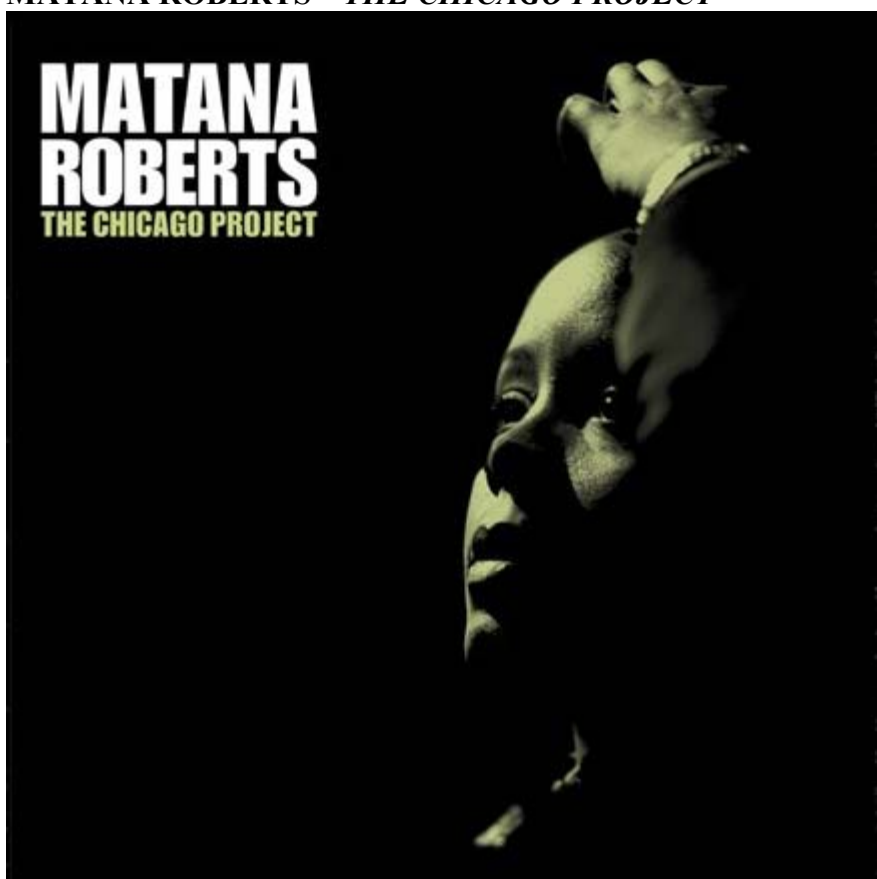
On "Rosa Parks", the first track, the four musicians venture back into electric Miles territory, with a soaring staccato trumpet, wah-wah pedal on the bass, thundering drums and with the electric piano filling in the spaces with interspersed chords and fast runs on the keys. The piece starts and ends with slow and meditative solo trumpet with a highly rhythmic very intense middle part. The second track is called "DeJohnette", aptly starting with fierce drumming by Ronald Shannon Jackson, joined by Vijay Iyer who surely is one of the most lyrical and rhythmically adroit pianists of the moment, he moves the track into free jazz regions, very abstract and dissonant, joined by John Lindberg on arco, then there's a moment's pause and Wadada's rhythmic trumpet invites the other musicians for an uptempo improvisation, which falls quiet for a long lyrical and abstract center part, which slowly gathers speed and momentum again : electrifying and beautiful.

The third track, "Caravan Of Winter", is slow and mysterious. The last and longest track is called "Tabligh", which is Arabic and means as much as "the duty to convert". The spiritual connotation of the piece is evident, with Wadada Leo Smith playing slow, precise and piercing trumpet tones over a sparse acoustic piano background to start with, then the piece explores a variety of moods, alters intensity and even styles. The four musicians complement each other quite well. And if the first track was

reminiscent of Miles, the music evolves into the more spiritual areas of the late phase Coltrane, creating vast expanses of sound, but with a relatively open texture, unhindered by fixed concepts, free, yet clearly structured. The soft lyrical approach of Lindberg and Iyer is in stark contrast to Ronald Shannon Jackson's hammering and pounding, which is absolutely essential here to bring the rawness needed in this journey, to create depth and variety. And Wadada Leo Smith spans everything. He is lyrical, intense, soaring, powerful, meditative, hard, soft, deep ... and offering lots of space to the other players.

The amazing feat is that the quartet - and this really is a quartet album, rather than that of an accompanied soloist - integrates much of the lightness and almost zen-like fragility of Wadada's solo or duo releases. An amazing and paradoxical album, full of musical inventiveness, human feelings and spiritual moments. For sure one of the highlights of this year. (Review by Stef Gisjells –<http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)

MATANA ROBERTS – *THE CHICAGO PROJECT*



Label: Central Control International

Release Date: February 2008

Tracklist: Exchange; Thrills; Birdhouse 1; Nomra; Love Call; Birdhouse 2; South By West; For Razi; Birdhouse 3.

Personnel: Matana Roberts: alto saxophone; Josh Abrams: bass; Jeff Parker: guitar; Frank Rosaly: drums; Fred Anderson: tenor saxophone (3, 6, 9).

I'm so happy to hear a new Matana Roberts album. Her Sticks & Stones records are worth looking for, especially Shed Grace, because she is a wonderful synthesist, integrating the best of modern free jazz in her music, as she does here. At least the sound

quality is much better than last year's Utech release (see also her comment about this). Her quartet consists of herself on alto, Jeff Parker on guitar, Josh Abrams on bass and Frank Rosaly on drums, all Chicagoans, hence the title. Her compositions are very melodic and rhythmic, yet very free at the same time, very soulful and bluesy, in the best AACM tradition. And the great thing here is the variation she brings into every piece, which are well-structured, with lots of style variations, rhythm and tempo changes, while maintaining this free edge.

The addition of Jeff Parker on guitar is a good one, because his playing is at times harsh and unpredictable, pushing Roberts into new musical areas, and at other times, gentle and traditional as can be, as on "Nomra". Roberts's tone is warm and clear, and her indebtedness to Coltrane is clear, both in her playing as in her composing, especially on "Love Call" and "South By West". The first is initially as expansive and spiritual in its approach as Coltrane himself, yet moving into Brötzmann territory, the latter ends in a beautiful duet with Parker's guitar. Fred Anderson is her sparring partner on three sax duets : "Birdhouse 1", "Birdhouse 2" and "Birdhouse 3". Despite these tracks' improvisational abstractness, the soulful and bluesy undertone remains a constant. Yet the most beautiful piece is "Exchange", which shifts from a free boppy high intensity start, past some abstract unisono transition into an absolutely wonderful bluesy melody, then to free improv, and back again. A rich, creative, expressive, varied and synthetic album. We need more of this. **(Review by Stef Gijssels, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com>)**

JOHN SURMAN / HOWARD MOODY – *RAIN ON THE WINDOW*



Label: ECM

Release Date: May 2008

Tracklist: Circum I; Stained Glass; The Old Dutch; Dancing In The Loft; Step Lively!; Stone Ground; Tierce; Circum II; Rain On The Window; Dark Reeds; O Waly Waly; A Spring Wedding; I'm Troubled In Mind; On The Go; Pax Vobiscum

Personnel: John Surman: soprano and baritone sax, bass clarinet; Howard Moody: church organ

Additional Information: Recorded January 2006 at Ullern Church, Oslo.

Organist and conductor Howard Moody previously appeared with John Surman when he conducted 'Proverbs and Songs', Surman's orchestral/choir project from 1996. Here, they form a stripped-down duo, with the usual ECM sheen heightening the resonant grandeur to an appropriate max. The pieces they perform are mostly originals, though with are a few surprise choices – 'O Waly Waly' and the Negro spiritual 'I'm Troubled in Mind' – but, as I always seem to end up saying when reviewing ECM discs, it is all rather one-mood, which, if that's what you're after, is fine. There's little to distinguish it from Surman's previous 'English pastoral' exercises, apart from the unusual instrumentation – and church organ goes much better with saxophones than you might expect, partly because of Surman's characteristically flowing lyricism, partly because Moody is such a subtle, unobtrusive accompanist (this is very much Surman's date). I remember hearing a concert which paired trumpeter Arve Henriksen with Stalle Storlaken on church organ, and both that date and this are proof that such instrumentation which worked well, in a similarly hushed context.

The most effective tracks find Surman on baritone, his rich sound either mixing with organ lower notes to create a melancholy a little more brawny than usual on 'Dark Reeds', or sitting up against a soft, barely heard chordal accompaniment on 'O Waly Waly' (the water is wide). Surman back to his roots, choirboy tradition etc. For me, it's not as compelling as his preceding release, 'The Spaces in Between', which made it onto my list of the top 10 records of 2007 in the first issue of 'eartrip', but those who enjoyed that CD should enjoy this. Basically, you know what to expect, and, on that score, Surman delivers. **(Review by David Grundy)**

GHEDALIA TAZARTES –*HYSTERIE OFF MUSIQUE* (2007)



Label: Jardin Au Fou

Release Date: September 2007

Tracklist: Soul 1; Soul 2; Soul 3; Soul 4; Soul 5; Country 1; Country 2; Country 3; Country 4; Country 5; Jazz; Bonus

Personnel: Ghédalia Tazartes: samples, electronics, voice, instruments.

Ghédalia Tazartes trace his roots to North African Sephardic tradition. His recordings exemplify the most prosperous marriage ever of ethnic vocalizing and imaginative electronic collage. Tazartes' strength lies in his dynamic, rhythmic and harmonic restraint. The element of surprise,

while ubiquitous, does not rely on the shock of opposites. Rather, his compositions flow naturally, always apportioning tasty ingredients, but in an organic, gradualist fashion.

His activity now spans three decades, yet his music is *hors temps*. Over the years, his bequest has graced many visual performances, but has stood on its own among the most accomplished French creations. From emotional psalms to shamanic hymns, Tazartes vocal eclecticism makes his art unclassifiable and distant from the electro-acoustic orthodoxy in his country.

His recording output dried out in the 1990s and many feared that the legend had been silenced forever. It is, therefore, with great expectations that fans of sonic asymmetry hail his return to a more prolific form.

Soul 1: The recording does not “open”, but breaks through the wall, imploding and rapidly mutating into old man’s lament. Increasingly discernible and sometimes nasal, the sorrowful voice will be accompanied by a piano abandoned on the desert hill.

Soul 2: Change of scenery. We are in a deep tropical valley as depicted earlier Jorge Reyes’s electronic landscapes. Tazartes’ art is less linear, though, with multiple harmonies emanating from a ringing synthesizer and interrupted by a crashing guitar feedback. The static spectacle is further enriched by hollow, impersonal voices flattened through the phone lines.

Soul 3: An apocalyptic moan, most probably in Hebrew, emerges from a cocoon of barely audible synthesized strings and subtle bass drone. We are close to post-“*Imperium*” era Current 93, but when Tazartes falls into the title *Hysteria*, the effect is less exaggerated than in David Tibet’s case. **Soul 4:** A stylistic mystery tour, mountain calls from the Caucasus, stern Coptic choirs, plaintive Arabian voices – all masterfully cohesive in this short sample of Tazartes’ mixing genius.

Soul 5: Electronic whispers, slothful electric bass, sinusoidal harmonics and dovish sobbing all return in loops of various lengths. The nocturnal quality of this fragment relies on the changing piano-forte combination of these four elements. **Country 1:** Scraps of acoustic guitar tuned similarly to Haino’s *Black Blues* give way to a love poem recited with a falsely foreign accent. The poet forsakenly expresses his love for a ‘little French girl’. When several violin notes intervene, the text begins to alternate credibly between English and French.

Country 2: A sharp electric guitar loop cuts through the previous track’s poem. Without the sudden ruptures, this would be a blues. But again, unruly children’s voices, weather events and lost chamber quartets distract the listener. **Country 3:** “Yes – this is a Love Song”, an old man’s voice announces. Self-ironic and very carnal song, indeed, follows. There is a marked contrast between the accompaniment by a congenial bowed acoustic bass, and the singer’s drunken, limping snort.

Country 4: After these short vignettes, the longest track on the CD unfolds with cinematic strings, oppressive seagulls and majestic ship horns. By the time we visualize a Titanic or Lusitania tragedy, a parody of jazz scat explodes, as if filtered through a long tube. Sustained echoes from Deep Listening tradition, electronic clicks, and finally an uncertain melody all posture in front of the cinematic theme. Tazartes sounds here like an adult impersonating a naughty kid, but not without some humorous twists. The blues guitar loops back in, briefly echoing an earlier passage in a structural formation reminding of 1970s progressive suites. It then becomes the main focus; harder, and as decisive as Albert Collins’s. The last two minutes are sent to us from another world: a

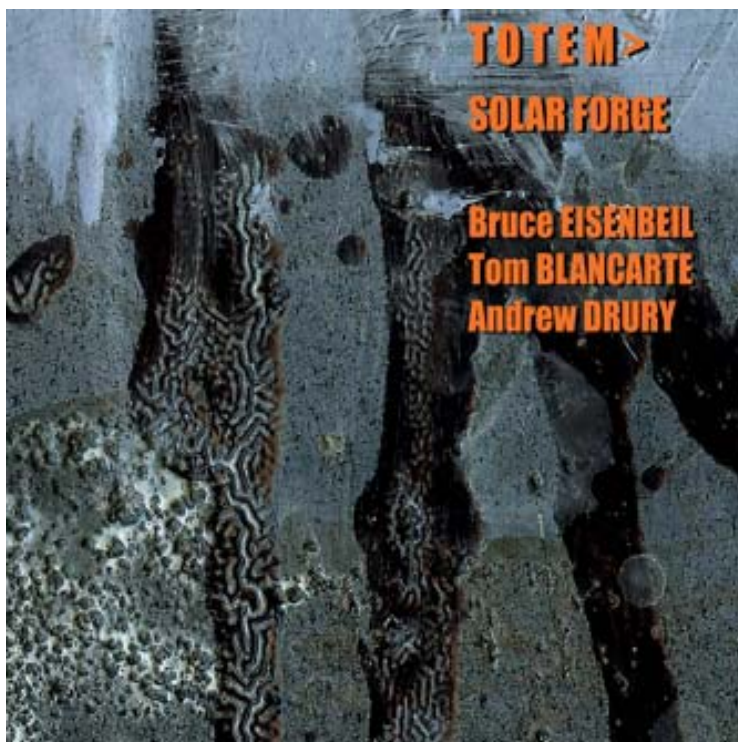
falsely demure Japanese girl (Yumi Nara), a choking wah-wah guitar, an opera mezzosoprano and crashing drums.

Country 5: To the accompaniment of two guitars – acoustic and wah-wah, Tazartes sings out his regret of not being a Spanish nobleman. His characteristic, weeping manner, never breaks into self-parody.

Jazz: The title is a misnomer for a heavy guitar cum strings fresco carried over by angelic voices. Tonality is shaky. Half-uttered morphemes and electronically edited percussion reinforce the increasingly staccato guitar and it's a relief when the fuzz ebbs away. Still, the strings will not reign on their own. The guitar hits back and the string section becomes more articulate, pushing the track to another level of intensity. Ultimately, the kettle drum adopts a function of a belated referee.

Bonus: A frightening virago takes it out on her entourage just as a southern comfort guitar relaxes with calculated indifference. It is up to the listener to infer the meaning... Familiar howling will close this chapter. **(Review by Tomasz Nadrowski, originally published at <http://sonicasymmetry.wordpress.com/>)**

TOTEM - SOLAR FORGE



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: Blooming Ore; Austentized; Hephaestus' Wrath; Annealed

Personnel: Bruce Eisenbeil: guitar; Tom Blancarte: bass; Andrew Drury: drums.

One would have to describe the line-up for this group as a 'guitar trio' – but that makes them sound too chamber-jazzy for comfort. In fact, there's very little to do with jazz at all in these unsettled and unsettling improvisations. The worry on listening to the opening minutes of the CD is that there's going to be lack of variety (in terms of texture

and dynamics), but in fact it turns out to be fairly compelling listening, and the more all-out assault of 'Blooming Ore' makes way for the more scurrying, improv-y sound of 'Austentized'. Derek Bailey's work with Japanese group the Ruins springs to mind – lots of squelchy, charred guitar, clattering and darting drums, and dirty, dark-hewn bass.

The second half of 'Hephaestus' Wrath' sees the guitar creating weird drone-ish clouds of noise, though with a fuzzy, scratchy edge enhanced by the assorted door-like creaks and scrapes of the percussion and a frantic string-hopping bass. It's uneasy music, grey and not designed to comfort anyone; there's something almost inhuman about it, perhaps due to the texture; there are none of the vocalised sounds you might get from a saxophone or trumpet, which at least add some human element – here, the metaphors I reach for tend to be material, to do with objects rather than with people.

Overall, the group tends to oscillate (though with some cohesion) between noisy 'wall of sound' style textures (evoking some sense of the large-scale) and focussing in on more jittery, miniscule detail (evoking an opposite sense of the microscopic). While, overall, it may be a little too monochrome for my tastes, it's good evidence that ESP are capable of recording interesting contemporary artists, as they were doing in their 60s heyday. While their re-issues programme is obviously where they concentrate their main activity, albums like this indicates that it's worth keeping an eye on their new releases too. **(Review by David Grundy)**

VIOLENCE JAZZ – PROTECTION

Label: Tiger Asylum

Release Date: 2007

Tracklist: Album consists of six untitled tracks

Personnel: Luke Moldof: electronics, guitar, vocals, saxophone; Gabriel Birnbaum: saxophone, drums, vocals; Eugene Lee – saxophone

Another CD-R release from Tiger Asylum (see below), departing from the Brooklyn-centric orientation that much of their catalogue displays by presenting this Boston-based trio (who have, it transpires from a quick internet search, renamed themselves Catholic Skin since this album came out). While the group's (original) name might imply the screaming, no-holds barred version of free jazz currently being practiced by the likes of Weasel Walter, in fact, there are just as many influences from other genres – loud, distorted drones echo various forms of electronic music, and the growling, low-end guitar owes a good deal to metal. The instrumentation contributes to this: while free jazz bands often stick with the basic line-up of the straight-ahead jazz group – at least, as far as bass and drums go – here, the squalling dual (even triple) saxophones are about the only jazz trace left. Furthermore, what's really important is the dense overall texture – there are no solos as such, and, indeed, it's the 'background' elements that tend to get highlighted over what would otherwise be the primary focus – the 'lead instruments'. Thus, track two gains its momentum from a heavy guitar riff, amplified by thunderous, repeated left-hand piano notes (presumably a sample, as the credits don't list anyone playing piano), to which the saxophone playing relates as a kind of mutant decoration.

Particularly on this track, there tends to be a muddiness to the sound at the points of most extreme volume, as if the recording equipment can't quite cope with the sheer force of sonic activity. This fits in, I suppose, with the CD-R label, lo-fi aesthetic, but, for me, diminishes, rather than contributes to the music – the group doesn't need this added

roughness to make their thing happen. It does perhaps indicate that the group's vision isn't quite fully developed – such tactics appear almost juvenile, or display a lack of faith in the power of their instruments to convey the sort of feelings they are otherwise so good at conveying.

In this sense, Violence Jazz are clearly coming from a different context to the 60s free jazz pioneers – one that includes the use of technology, and embraces a certain subversive streak that is almost 'post-modern' (as well as the more straight-out anarchy/defiance of their forbears). If there's a sense of humour here, it's one that's as twisted as the mangled car wreck depicted in the cover art: in the midst of track 2's lumbering doomscape, for instance, the intrusion of a speeded-up vocal sample (someone rambling about sticking a glow-stick up their ass while tripping on acid) at once deflates any sense of tragedy, any sense of a heroic "fuck-you" flung in the face of uncaring or hostile forces. It's perhaps a little crude, a little too self-consciously disruptive a device to really further what the piece has already accomplished, and it also prevents the listener from experiencing the full power of what is otherwise the disc's most intense track (for sustained tension, if not for levels of volume and aggression). The mocking laughter latent behind this humour feels almost too controlled, too thought-through, and that's something again a worry on the penultimate track. A jazzy saxophone, playing some more melodic sounds, is drowned out by howling feedback, and soon gives up the quest for some respite as the band launch into the longest piece (on what is a fairly short record), a fifteen-minute barrage which doesn't resort to such trickery and is all the better for it. Overall, then, despite a few quibbles, this is a fine album which makes a definite impact. **(Review by David Grundy)**

CHRIS WELCOME – *QUARTET*



Label: Tigerasylum records

Release Date: April 2007

Tracklist: #1+2; #3; #4; #5; #12; #8+15+6; #7; #9; #10; #11+13; #14

Personnel: Jonathan Moritz: tenor and soprano saxophone; Chris Welcome: guitar; Shayna Dulberger: upright bass; John McLellan: drums

Additional Information: Recorded February 11th, 2007, at Wombat Recording Studio, Brooklyn, New York. Released as both CD-R and 12" vinyl LP. The album can be ordered from <http://www.tigerasylum.com>.

This is one of a number of intriguing releases on bassist Jordon Schranz's excellent Tiger Asylum label, and I think that credit and an explanation for that wider enterprise should precede a discussion of this particular album. Probably the best explanation appears on the label's website, and I think the best thing I can do is to reproduce it in full. "In response to the growing disinclination of most of the record labels with whom he was working to support the various vinyl formats, Jordon Schranz started Tigerasylum Records in 2005 to release LPs by his group, the Eastern Seaboard. He has since expanded to include CDR releases, as well as additional vinyl formats, and broadened the roster to include other key players in the avant-garde and experimental

music scenes of the Williamsburg and Bushwick neighborhoods of Brooklyn. With a heavy emphasis on young artists performing improv and experimental jazz, the label brings together the sounds of noise, psych, no-wave, neo-classical, free jazz, and the European avant-garde – everything that's happening.”

So there you have it: diversity is the key – but not diversity for the sake of it; rather, diversity because interesting music shouldn't be (and isn't) restricted to any one genre. Note also the key phrase “young artists” – but, again, this is not simply a case of promoting these musicians simply because they are young, and therefore might provide some sort of ‘hope for the future’ (the sort of gesture that has become rampant in the UK, and that one suspects is in the absurd over-feting of musicians like Gwyllim Simcock or the Neil Cowley). Instead, this is genuinely exciting music-making, with a freshness and fearlessness about it that is perhaps best exemplified by the work of trumpeter Peter Evans, who features on another Tigerasylum release, with the group The Right Moves, and whose quartet album for Firehouse 12 was one of my picks for the top 10 albums of 2007 in the previous issue of ‘eartrip.’ It's not just Evans, though – all the artists on Tigerasylum's roster demonstrate a set of varied approaches not beholden to jazz tradition, working in this areas which are hard to classify according to the sort of narrow generic strictures that we're used to working with.

And so on to the Chris Welcome Quartet. Theirs is a music that doesn't give up its secrets on first listen – and I choose the word ‘secrets’ deliberately, for this is music that can be said to ‘know’ something: some dark hidden recess which it thoughtfully explores in carefully structured, uncluttered atonality. This music knows, for instance, how to use silence and a liberating limitation of palette– drummer McLellan, as indicated in his solo intro on piece #12, tends to focus on just one area of the kit at a time (in this particular instance, letting cymbal swish predominate), using whatever tools he has chosen for colour rather than for overtly rhythmic, ‘time-keeping’ purposes (though rhythm there is, of a more fractured kind that fits in with the group's aesthetic). It's an approach that shows a great deal of patience, and a subtle understanding of musical flow and texture – certainly, one that is more rewarding than the rather simplistic, overly busy, rock-style drumming that seems to be favoured nowadays in a number of jazz contexts.

The same sort of thoughtful musicianship is demonstrated by every member of the group: Moritz' tenor playing moves between a smooth yet urgent caress gliding up into piercing high notes (#1+2), and a straining, almost desperate wheeziness (#5). Elsewhere, his soprano playing at times suggests Evan Parker, but without the streams of expression and constant bubbled flow generated by Parker's circular breathing and general approach – instead, Moritz leaves lots of gaps, as if letting the music breathe in the silence – as if that is where the meat of the music actually lies.

Welcome, meanwhile, though the nominal leader, is about as un-flashy and un-showy as you can get. He prefers to let sustained tones hang than to play lines (there's nothing approaching a be-bop fretboard workout here). When he does choose to play lines, there's normally a very good reason to do so; when introduced, they are pithy and advance the music, adding a little burst and edge of intensity which spurs on Moritz or leads the music in another direction, perhaps adding textural variety or a change of mood.

Mood is vitally important to this album, and reviewers elsewhere have identified an almost-gothic moodiness that pervades things (and which is certainly suggested by the haunting cover art). For me, though, it can't even be tied down that far – it's far too

evasive, gorgeously abstract, challenging and almost self-defeating in its conflicting/shared impulses towards the intellectual/ cerebral and the emotional pitch strained to the utmost, like the taut muscles of a neck craning up at something just out of clear sight. The fact that this self-defeat is completely avoided makes this music all the more valuable – on the edge is where the most interesting things happen, after all.
(Review by David Grundy)

ALAN WILKINSON / EDDIE PREVOST - *SO ARE WE, SO ARE WE*



Label: Matchless Recordings

Release Date: February 2007

Tracklist: On Green Street; East, East, East London; Supa, Supa; For Marlene; So Are We, So Are We

Personnel: Alan Wilkinson: baritone and alto sax; Eddie Prevost: drums

Additional Information: Cover art by Gina Southgate

Alan Wilkinson is, for me, one of the best British players currently working in what I suppose one would term a free jazz vocabulary, and I'm bemused as to why I've only just come across this disc, which came out last year. I'll try to remedy that error of timing, anyhow. I'll also fall into the trap of mentioning 'Interstellar Space', as Brian Morton's liner notes do, and as other reviews do, but only to note that such comparisons really have little use in this context. Wilkinson comes less out of Coltrane (in contrast to, say, Paul Dunmall) than Ayler - but neither of these comparisons really cover his style, which can have a particularly gruff quality yet is never overly harsh. His honks often lead to rhythmic passages, building to a sense of sheer joy that expresses itself best when he takes the horn out of his mouth for some enthusiastic vocalising, vaguely reminiscent of a tribal holler. Prevost's playing, meanwhile, is a lot more jazzy here than it can be elsewhere, often including passages where he plays time (though never any one rhythm

for any long stretch) when it suits the music, but above all it's responsive and it creates response. It's less about Rashied Ali washes of sound than about breaking things up, keeping things moving, making the drum kit respond to his touch, and to Wilkinson's exhortations and explorations, with colours and light rather than energy.

Particular highlights include Wilkinson's bright and adventurous alto on the opening piece, or the conclusion of 'East, East, East London', where his sucking noises work with Prevost's pianissimo patterings as the track bubbles away to almost nothing before a final surge wraps things up. Best of all, on 'For Marlene', are his baritone musings over Prevost's slow tom-tom tread - the drums constantly hinting at and promising faster rhythms which never quite come, and thus generating a constant tension. Eventually this leads to some sort of climax, but it's not the free jazz blow-out one might expect: instead, Wilkinson briefly abandons melodic lines for restrained multiphonic screeching and trilling (if such a thing sounds impossible, listen to the music, then come back to me!), with Prevost still maintaining a dark-hued semi-funereal tinge underneath. As best illustrated by this track, there's never any sense that one man is 'leading' the music at the expense of another - it's a nicely shared experience, with of course the third factor of the listener added as well. 'Sharing music', then, but with none of the rather twee, 'nice' connotations that phrase might convey - committed and direct improv all the way. Wilkinson and Prevost mean business. **(Review by David Grundy)**

In Brief

GETATCHEW MEKURYA/ THE EX – *MOA ANBESSA*

Thought I'd give this one a short mention, even though it's two years old now, as it's the sort of thing that could easily get overlooked. Oddly enough, it was on a BBC TV broadcast from the Jazz/ World stage at this year's Glastonbury Festival that I first came across Mekurya, performing with Ethiopiques: I was struck by a saxophone tone that reminded me, with its clarion-crisp, burning power of the melodic statements of Pharoah Sanders. Doing a little further research, I find out that the style he plays in is of his own invention – called the Shellele, it incorporates traditional war songs, and was not influenced by free jazz but developed separately. A striking corroboration, then, of the African roots that so many free jazzers claimed as informing their playing.

Anyway, after the TV broadcast, I duly tracked down his appearance on the appropriate disc in the Ethiopiques series, where the organ backing gives a lounge/exotica kind of touch – and then came across this, a more unusual (or at least, unlikely) proposition which pairs him with Danish punk veterans the Ex. Hearing him soar out over beefy sax riffs (from a guest horn section) is a delight, though I'm not sure that the half-shouted vocals are always such a good fit. Still, this album is really about Getatchew, and he delivers some stonkingly good sax playing. Highly recommended. **(Review by David Grundy)**

PAT METHENY – *DAY TRIP*

In the last issue I gave rather a negative review of Metheny's collaboration with Brad Mehldau. I'm pleased to report that this is much better – though I still couldn't claim to be a great Metheny fan, and though this isn't really my thing so much these days, it's clearly a very solid record in a straight-ahead jazz vein. Whereas Metheny and

Mehldau seemed to be rather hesitant, skirting round each other, afraid of standing on each other's toes, the trio format allows the guitarist to deliver some unfussy jazz playing – what he does best. None of the dodgy fusion trappings, synclavier et al, here. I prefer the guitarist on acoustic, which, thankfully, he sticks to for the most part (his 'rock' sound is demonstrated on 'Red One', which also sees him switching to a brief burst of reggae accompaniment for the bass solo). And while 'Is this America? (Katrina 2005)' is perhaps a bit sentimental / manipulative (could you get away with the music if it wasn't a piece with political shading its title?), the bass solo redeems it. Indeed, what makes 'Day Trip' stand out for me is the bass playing of Christian McBride, who gets in some marvelous, melodic solos – definitely cementing his reputation as one of the top players on his instrument today. **(Review by David Grundy)**

RETURN OF THE NEW THING – *ALCHEMY*

If you like creative, genre-bending, fully improvised, expansive and energetic free jazz, then you will surely enjoy this. The British-French quartet, consisting of Dan Warburton on piano and violin, Jean-Luc Guionnet on alto sax, Francois Fuchs on bass and Edward Perraud on drums, has a real take-no-prisoners approach. The three long tracks (approx. 29, 24 and 17 minutes, aptly titled 29:09, 24:41 and 17:20), are a pure powerhouse of full-speed intensity and unrelenting energy. Once in a while the wall of violence slows down for spiky and intense interactions between the four musicians, but not for long, because it swells again and becomes another giant wave that pulls and pushes everything along that crosses its path until it eventually comes crashing down, with splatters of piano notes, crashing cymbals and throbbing strings flying in all directions. The second track starts very quietly, creating bizarre soundscapes, evolving into a double-tempoed quartet, with sax and drums playing up a storm, while piano and arco bass compete for slowness, but it doesn't take long before they too are sucked up by the passing tornado, violent and powerful, which after a while unexpectedly disappears, evaporates or whatever those things do, to leave the empty space to dispersed sound debris, bits and pieces of music scattered all over the place with no clear order, each individually meaningless, and which, surprisingly, reassemble to become, yes, another juggernaut, another behemoth of sound, moving hard, moving fast, occupying all space, propelled forward, sucking up everything that it encounters on its way, and even more surprisingly, full of velvet sensitivity. **(Review by Stef Gisjells, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)**

SPRING HEEL JACK – *SONGS AND THEMES*

The British duo of sampler Ashley Wales and multi-instrumentalist John Coxon, better known as Spring Heel Jack, continue their search for new sounds and musical sculptures, combining electronics with the expressive openness of free jazz. And true to their former releases on the Matthew Shipp's Thirsty Ear label, the musicians performing here are of the highest calibre : Roy Campbell on trumpet, John Tchicai on sax and bass clarinet, John Edwards on bass and Tony Marsh on drums, with guests Orphy Robinson on vibraphone, J Spaceman on electric guitar and Mark Sanders and Rupert Clervaux on drums. This is possibly their lightest and most accessible release to date, with slow moving atmospheric pieces, over which Campbell and Tchicai weave their often melancholy solos, with some exceptions. On "1000 years", J Spaceman builds a wall of

guitar noise, and on the beautiful "Folk Players", Edward's arco bass, accentuated with vibes and percussion, produces some heartrending sounds. Another highlight is "For Paul Rutherford", a subdued homage by Campbell, accompanied by one lonely drum, for the trombonist who died last year. True, the editing takes away a lot of the spontaneity and emotional expressiveness we expect from jazz, but on the other hand, Coxon and Wales do it with so much respect for the material, with so much eye for subtlety, and with a great coherence, looking for new musical avenues, that the end result is really great.

(Review by Stef Gisjells, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)

TOTALITARIAN MUSICAL SECT – *WARM THINGS: LIVE AT GES-21, VOL. 2*

Ilia Belorukov is a player to watch (OK, if you want to be precise, a player to listen to). Very young, but with an extraordinarily well-developed voice, I doubt that many will have heard of him, apart from on his local Russian scene, but I happened to stumble across some of his work on the internet, and I think that he's a real discovery. Much of the music he has made has been released for free, on net-labels – I haven't managed to catch up fully with it all yet, but, in all probability, will have more to say on some of the albums in the next issue. On this particular recording, he's part of a trio in which he doubles on alto sax and flute, Vitaliy Kucherov doubles on electric guitar and flute, and Dmitry Khakhovskiy is on the bass.

'Thing Six' begins so quietly that you can barely hear what's going on, but after the first tentative saxophone sounds about a minute in, things build in volume. About five minutes, there's a very curious effect, as guitarist Kucherov dusts off some Sonny-Sharrock-style guitar squalls, but quietly, in the background. Ten minutes in, and things have simmered down to a beautifully desolate passage of saxophone musings over repeated bowed bass notes, functioning drone-style; but the bassist's decision to start springing up and down his strings leads to insect-energy, the guitar squeaking and buzzing while alto and bass pursue similar exploratory tangents. There's bass solo, with some arco playing which reminds me very much of Barry Guy – and, in fact, the kind of interaction displayed on that disc recalls Guy's work with Evan Parker – before the track ends with shaking bells and flute.

'Thing Seven' gets off to a stuttering start, then becomes woozy and nauseous, before, towards the end of the track, we're treated to some dissonant, distorted guitar shredding. Guitar again dominates the texture on 'Thing Eight', as the track ends with repeating guitar chords, Belorukov not so much soloing over the top as providing an unsettling counterpoint. Though self-produced, the recording quality is good throughout. Download from <http://clinicalarchives.blogspot.com>. (Review by David Grundy)

TREVOR WATTS / JAMIE HARRIS – *ANCESTRY*

Brilliant! British alto saxophonist Trevor Watts and percussionist Jamie Harris play 13 songs of free improvisation, but how : rhythmic, free, melodic, intense, jubilant, sad, with musical influences from around the globe : Africa, Asia, the Middle-East, Europe, and then jazz of course. Time-Out Magazine announced their live performance last year as an "intoxicating tribal jazz-dance", and that's a pretty good description. Watts has of course decades of musical experience, and he has played in all kinds of genres and ensembles, from the avant-garde Spontaneous Music Ensemble to his own Moiré percussion bands, which blend African rhythms with free blowing. On this album, he

brings the music back to its barest essence, and as usual - for me at least - that works best. And his technique is superb. On "Maribor Memories", for instance, he plays the entire tune through circular breathing and extremely melodic, with tempo changes and all, instead of the usual repetitive drone you might expect. If there is one downside to the recording, it's the fact that some tracks are just extracts from the performance, with fade-ins and fade-outs. I hate that, especially when the music is so good, because it just gives you a taste of what you have missed. **(Review by Stef Gisjells, originally published at <http://freejazz-stef.blogspot.com/>)**

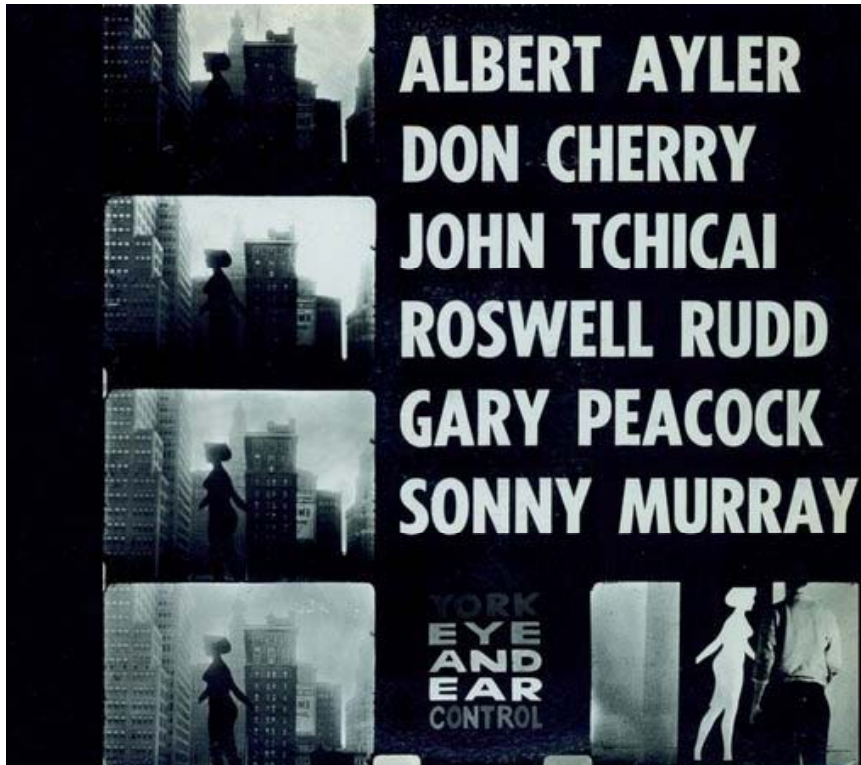
NORMA WINSTONE TRIO - *DISTANCES*

While pieces such as 'A Song for England' could be said to echo John Surman's investigations into Englishness (in his duo with Howard Moody, also reviewed in this issue), this is a much more cosmopolitan record overall. The words to 'Ciant' are written by an Italian, Pier Paolo Pasolini, while the music is by a Frenchman, Erik Satie, and the album (which features Italian and German collaborators) was recorded in Udine for release on Manfred Eicher's ECM label. Indicative of the pervading mood is the fact that, in 'Giant's Gentle Stride', Coltrane's 'Giant Step' is turned into a plaintive ballad, with oblique lyrics seemingly referring to the saxophonist ("every song was a prayer") but also fitting in with the general air of whimsical fantasy that becomes more explicit on songs such as 'The Mermaid' and 'Here Comes the Flood'. At times both lyrics and music verge on the sentimental ('Remembering the Start of a Never-Ending Story') – in particular, Klaus Gesing's piercing soprano flights become a little wearing (it would have been nicer to hear him play a little more bass clarinet, to complement the darker, deeper side of Winstone's voice, which is such a refreshing contrast to so many piping, coquettish little-girl jazz singers). Nevertheless, it's a pleasant listen, if not the most important item in Winstone's discography. **(Review by David Grundy)**



RE-ISSUES/ HISTORICAL

ALBERT AYLER/ DON CHERRY/ JOHN TCHICAI/ ROSWELL RUDD/ GARY PEACOCK/ SUNNY MURRAY – *NEW YORK EYE AND EAR CONTROL*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: February 2008

Tracklist: Don's Dawn; AY; ITT

Personnel: Albert Ayler: tenor sax; Don Cherry: trumpet, cornet; John Tchicai: alto sax; Roswell Rudd: trombone; Gary Peacock: bass; Sunny Murray: drums

Additional Information: Recorded in New York City, July 17th, 1964 by Michael Snow for use as the soundtrack to his film 'Walking Woman' (a.k.a. 'New York Eye and Ear Control').

I haven't seen the Michael Snow film for which this is the 'soundtrack', though, as with Miles Davis' 'A Tribute to Jack Johnson', I think the album really exists as a separate document – these sounds are not dependent on images at all. Mind you, it is intriguing that the movie was made around the music, rather than the other way round. How one might structure a film around free jazz is the sort of problem that none too many artists have faced since then, and this endeavour attest to the cross-discipline fertilization that was going on in the vibrant creative air of the mid-60s (the album was recorded by a film-maker, at the flat of poet Paul Haines).

This is pure collective improvisation – 'energy music' was one of the (still-apt) terms that floated around as critics tried to work out what the hell was going on. "You never heard such sounds in your life" – indeed. Ayler dominates – by sheer force, one might say – his sound is so big, the execution of his ideas so compelling (that massive vibrato was pretty much unprecedented and is since unmatched) –though I'm not sure that I really agree with the argument, put across in several reviews I've read, that the

music finds its direction solely from him, floundering when he's not playing. Listen, for instance, to the section about ten minutes into 'AY', where Rudd's trombone is stoked by Tchicai's piquant, barely-heard counterpoint, Gary Peacock's ship-mast low-end creakings and Sunny Murray's groaning vocalized song over his slippery cymbal colour-rhythm. This is just one of several moments of superb Rudd-Tchicai interaction, which may come as something of a surprise, considering their rather different approaches: Rudd's often humorous (boozy smears) and reminiscent of the joyous of the marching-bands that Ayler so loved, Tchicai's more inquisitive and prone to introspective lyricism. In the particularly example I've just singled out, it's true that things do threaten to stall, and the re-entry of the leader gets things going again – thus, this section does feel rather like an interlude. In addition, Tchicai perhaps suffers the most from competing for attention in a front-line consisting of such strong musical personalities – he's the last horn player that you notice during ensemble passages – but he does get some glorious moments, such as the jittery interaction with Cherry, four minutes into 'ITT' – not quite the lyrical force he was on 'Ascension,' but doing something different and intriguing.

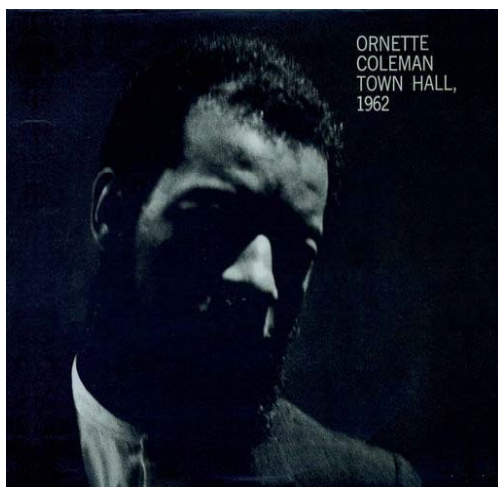
And, even if he does dominate proceedings, I don't really see the problem of listening to Ayler in his prime. It's especially nice to hear him in a completely improvised context, without constant resource to the march-themes that obsessed him elsewhere (although one does begin 'ITT'). Whether blowing fearsome low end sounds which defy description, or up high in the altissimo heavens, it's clear that this was an exceptional player – and any opportunity to hear him, especially at this stage, when he was playing 'pure' free jazz (as opposed to the semi-commercial later work), is most welcome.

Don Cherry is the melodic link to things– his swooning half-quotation from 'Ruby My Dear,' thirteen minutes into 'AY,' feels not at all contrived, not at all out-of-place, as quotations can, and comes a few seconds after he's actually re-initiated the music, which had slid to silence. If anyone can be said to be 'musical director', apart from Ayler, it would be Cherry. A player still seriously underrated, from jazz cognoscenti who find him technically not up to scratch (hell, he wasn't trying to be Clifford Brown, was he?) and dislike his explorations into the music of other cultures during the 70s and 80s. Whatever you think about the latter (I'm rather more inclined to be favourable than I was a few years ago), it's clear from listening to his work here, and on his own ensemble projects (such as the quintet heard on ESP's Café Montmartre recordings), that he had a very strong sense of structure, of timing, of playing what was required by the overall sweep of the music (at the same time as producing some lovely detail). In this particular context, he comes across as something of an intermediary, half-way between Ayler's terrifying power and Tchicai's yearning. One mustn't overlook that, despite the density of musical events produced by the group as a whole, the individual players are often very lyrical – Ayler's vibrato is torn from the depths of a soul that is as much melodic as it is about pure sound – and we know about Tchicai and Cherry (with Rudd the anarchist, liable to swing either way, to disrupt things with a sly gesture or outrageous about-turn).

So, while this is not quite the bridge between Ornette's 'Free Jazz' and Coltrane's 'Ascension' that, at times in the past, I thought it was (maybe Sun Ra's full-band freakouts hold the key to that), it's still a very rich and important album– how could it fail to be, with these musicians?

(Review by David Grundy)

ORNETTE COLEMAN – *TOWN HALL 1962*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: February 2008

Tracklist: Doughnut; Sadness; Dedication to Writers and Poets; The Ark

Personnel: On Tracks 1-2 and 4, Ornette Coleman Trio –

Ornette Coleman: alto sax; David Izenzon: bass;

Charles Moffett: percussion; On Track 3, String Quartet –

Selwart Clarke, Nathan Goldstein: violin; Julien Barber:

viola; Kermit Moore: cello

Additional Information: Recorded December 21st, 1962 at Town Hall, New York City.

For some reason, it's always Coleman's later periods that I've concentrated on, rather than his more famous earlier recordings with Don Cherry et al. The nakedness, the unadorned *directness* of his playing is just that much more affecting (despite the occasional lapses in taste, like the chirpy little theme, reminiscent to me of a school playground taunt, that surfaces at various points as 'Dancing in Your Head' and 'The Good Life'). Yet listening to him on here – and this is meant to be a compliment – I was struck by just how similar his playing is in 1972, performing a rare solo feature at the Berlin Jazz Tage, and in 1962, stretching out within, and over the liberating confines of an extremely tight, wired 'rhythm section'.

'Town Hall 1962' is the sound of Ornette unencumbered, adhering to nothing but his own vision. Yet, at the same time, as Ethan Iverson points out in a fascinating short essay on Coleman's late 50s and early 60s music, the saxophonist relied very much on having the right musical partners – for his playing to sound right, he needs the space to be opened up beneath him, with just the right balance between looseness (or an impression of looseness, at least) and control. With this in mind, the music's success is in a large part due to the fact that Izenzon and Moffett are so truly *simpatico*, so responsive to Ornette's methods of expression.

Coleman *launches* in on 'Doughnut' – at least, that's what it feels like. This is an immensely powerful statement of intent; like a diver pushing themselves off the board in order to give themselves the best possible landing in the numinous waters below. In truth, he probably plays those first few notes with no more force than he employs at numerous other points during the long solos he takes elsewhere on the album – but, as a review of last year's concert in London in the previous issue of 'eartrip' reminded me, his sound is so startling that the first appearance is always bound to astonish, no matter how familiar one is with the man's music.

A little over five minutes into the track and he pauses – for the moment. Moffett concentrates on the ride cymbal, creating a constant, yet delicate momentum, as if running on tip-toe. Izenzon's bass harmonics at first sound out as if in the distance, a ghostly commentary on what appears to be a drum solo, but it soon becomes clear that this is going to be a duet, Izenzon alternating more classically-inflected arco work with scrawly runs that echo Ornette's own characteristic yelps up and down the saxophone

keys. Ornette's return sounds more joyful and liberated than ever, Moffett and Izenzon throwing in their own special, subtle firebombs, one after the other, to create the sense of a dramatic conclusion. This isn't just showing off, something to make the applause that little bit louder, but a necessary tactic; Ornette's own playing, for me, often feels as if it could go on forever – what one might call, I suppose, a quality of timelessness. He doesn't really seem to have the traditional sense of an *ending*, though of course there are varying degrees of intensity, and there is (spontaneous) construction in what he plays.

'Sadness', the album's 'ballad' feature, is him at his most piercing, in a way that catches me in the throat every time. His notes have this way of *singing* out – staying at a sustained volume for seconds at a time, then flowing into the next phrase. Moffett is less about strict time-keeping here, more impressionistic, concentrating on the cymbals to provide a sound palette which both merges, and, at times, gently clashes with Izenzon's moaning arco bass.

'Dedication to Poets and Writers' is Coleman's ten-minute composition for string quartet – very different in tone and texture to the trio pieces (though perhaps Izenzon's bowed playing provides some sort of a link). Obviously swirling around at this time was the so-called 'Third Stream' movement of which Coleman was a part, and the musical language is similar to that being explored in Third Stream works by Gunther Schuller and Don Ellis – influenced by serialism, and often concerned with complexities of rhythm, as well as pitches of troubled emotion that it would be tempting to suggest represent a kind of zeitgeist reaction to mid-century insecurity: an uneasy modernism. Whereas 'Skies of America' deals in the more optimistic 'rugged pioneers' language of American composers like Walter Piston, Aaron Copland, Howard Hanson and Roy Harris, this is Coleman at his most intellectual and technically advanced – proof that he could do the European classical music thing just as well as any conservatory-trained musician, without sacrificing what makes him himself.

Well, maybe 'Dedication' is interesting more for historical reasons than for being one of Ornette's best pieces; but what follows, I'm bound to say, is the album's centerpiece, 'The Ark': it's so damned long... Twenty-three minutes: that's Coltrane-style timing! Flippancy aside, this broadened context allows Coleman to reel off his most fully developed ideas on the record. He just keeps going and going – as I was hinted at earlier, there is never any sense of his flagging, just a constant, joyous ream of sustained invention. He could play one-hundred-and-twenty-three minutes and the music would still be just as fresh. There's just so much going on here that I can't possibly hope to describe it all, but I will note that some of the repeated figures bear a striking resemblance to the sort of insistent, rhythmic playing that would come to the fore in the jagged funk setting of Prime Time. And Izenzon's bass playing is just so good – while most bass players seem to use arco predominantly for ballads, for moments of the deepest seriousness, to add a touch of solemnity, Izenzon is equally happy to bow his way around the strings during up-tempo sections. The sound he creates when doing this is a mixture of the modern/progressive and the natural/ regressive – shuddering single-string figures obliquely echo the sound of the machine, of the motor, and yet somehow, feel very human – the sound of nature, of wood, of gut. That combination of modernity and something which could be described as primal is what lies at the heart of Ornette's music-making too – and I don't feel like I'm stretching things too far to say that this record shows genius at work. **(Review by David Grundy)**

TED DANIEL QUINET – *TAPESTRY*

TAPESTRY

Ted Daniel Quintet



Label: Porter Records

Release Date: 2008

Tracklist: Asagefo (prev. unreleased); Tapestry; Sweet Dreams; Mozambique.

Personnel: Ted Daniel: trumpet (1) flugelhorn (2-4); Khan Jamal: vibraphone; Richard Daniel: electric Fender Rhodes piano with Leslie speaker, wah wah pedal and echo-plex; Tim Ingles: 'non-fretted' electric bass with wah-wah pedal; Jerome Cooper: drums

Additional Information: Recorded at Ornette Coleman's Artists House, January 26th, 1974. Originally released by Sun Records in 1974 (produced by Noah Howard).

Like Byard Lancaster, another artist whose work is being heard once again thanks to the re-issues programme on Porter Records, one of Ted Daniel's early groups featured guitarist Sonny Sharrock. That group was Brute Force, which tended more towards conventional soul material, with the addition of a few wilder touches. Though the quintet featured here contains two of the members of said group, Ted's brother Richard Daniel and bassist Tim Ingles, this music is a lot more exploratory in nature. The heavily electrified line-up might lead one to suspect something in line with Miles Davis' 1970s jazz-rock odyssey, but Daniel approaches things more from a spiritual/ free jazz angle. Recorded in New York at Ornette Coleman's loft performance space in 1974, this was one half of a concert shared with the Noah Howard Quartet, and, generally, Daniels' group also shares the same sort of jubilant Afro-centric emotional power.

'Asagefo', a previously unreleased track, starts things off, with Daniel blowing ecstatic variants on a melodic fragment over a churning group whose sound is placed somewhere between the tempestuous and the celebratory. Richard Daniel's Fender Rhodes is enhanced to the gills with distorting effects: Leslie speaker, wah-wah pedal and echo-plex succeed in making what could be a very gentle instrument into a seething, dirty monster, enhanced by Jerome Cooper's almost constant cymbal spatter and Tim Ingles' hyperactive bass work, with someone (presumably Ted) screaming exhortations into the mix. Ingles is never content to provide a steady groove, something else which distinguishes this from Miles' work with Michael Henderson; indeed, if it were not for

the instrumentation, one would immediately associate this quintet with free jazz rather than jazz fusion.

‘Tapestry’ takes things down a notch, though it’s not really a ballad – Daniel’s trumpet has the lyrical but muscular energy of Hugh Masekela (a very good jazz player, in my opinion, something which is rather overshadowed by the success of his vocal work over the years). This is scene-painting music, music of vast spaces and magnificent sun-drenched horizons, as the band leisurely rolls through the chord sequence, with Khan Jamal’s vibes giving things a bright edge, and the rhythm section preventing things from becoming too comfortable (Cooper never seems to stop – he’s tireless).

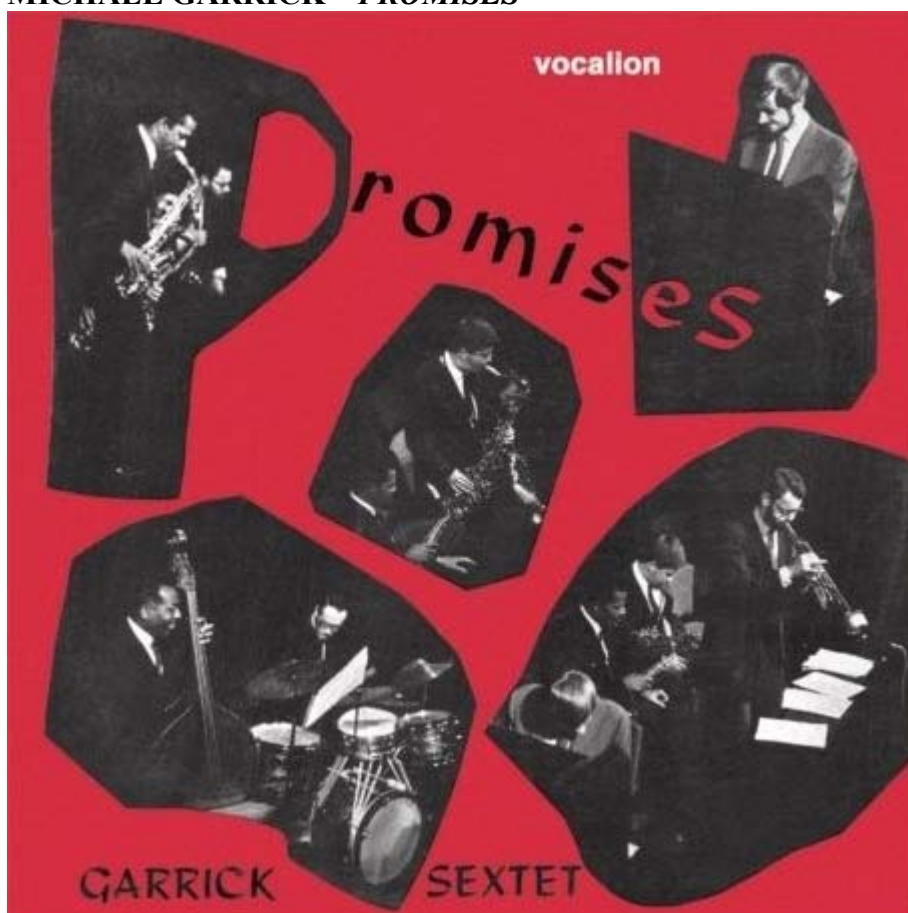
‘Sweet Dreams’ really is a ballad, though: hazy electric piano, gentle, deep resonances from Ingles’ bass and hovering cymbals lay a relaxed and undulating backdrop for some trumpet-work that has the feeling of a proclamation; Daniel as the griot, singing his inner feelings into public utterance, extemporizing on the moment while with a deep sense of the traditions and conditions that form his response, in moments that speak both of private and collective wonderment, building to organic climaxes and subsiding

‘Mozambique’, the shortest track on the record, is also the fiercest: the Rhodes’ wah-wah pedal is used to the full, creating an almost guitar-like accompaniment, while Daniels’ trumpet has a strong vocal quality – as, indeed, it had on the ballad, but this time more prone to the scream than the song, delivering an urgent call to the arms rather than a serene hymn to nature. I love that Rhodes sound, I have to say, and I love the urgency of this track: it’s a fine way to end the album.

So far, I’ve had only good things to say about ‘Tapestry’, but I should note that the recording quality a bit of a let-down; what with all the electrified instruments, and in particular the density of having both fender Rhodes and vibraphone in the same line-up, things do tend to get rather muddy, and that can make listening to the whole record in one go a somewhat more taxing experience than it needs be (particularly on headphones). Still, Daniel has not been recorded nearly enough, and this is an excellent opportunity to hear some passionate and powerful music-making, from a very creative time in jazz history – despite what Ken Burns would have you believe. **(Review by David Grundy)**



MICHAEL GARRICK – *PROMISES*



Label: Vocalion

Release Date: 2008

Tracklisting: Promises; Parting is Such; I Got Rhythm; A Thing of Beauty; Merlin the Wizard; Second Coming; Requiem; Leprechaun Leap; Portrait of a Young Lady; Song By the Sea

Personnel: Michael Garrick: piano, celeste; Ian Carr: trumpet, flugelhorn; Joe Harriott: alto sax; Tony Coe: tenor sax, clarinet; Coleridge Goode or Dave Green: bass; Colin Barnes: drums

Additional Information: Originally released in 1965; first British CD reissue.

From the very off, ‘Promises’ actually delivers perhaps more than any other Michael Garrick album. The title track shimmers with Ian Carr’s eloquent solo underpinned by Garrick’s terse but incisive piano. A mixture on this album of Coleridge Goode and Dave Green on bass, Colin Barnes on drums and either Tony Coe or Joe Harriott on reeds. ‘Parting is Such’ could be a track to represent the whole of the 1960s (the monochrome period). At times hymnal in its solemnity, with a wailing Harriott on alto, it portrays a picture of rainy England on a Sunday afternoon, better than anything before or since. The only standard on the album, ‘I Got Rhythm’ is a cheeky but novel paean to Gershwin’s original which only dissolves into a totally recognisable incarnation of itself in the last few bars or so. ‘A Thing of Beauty’ is exactly that, a ballad so perfectly apposite that it needs no further description. ‘Merlin The Wizard’ is yet another example of Garrick’s compositional skills at their finest. The head soon gives way to a boppish pastiche in the bridge which returns to the main theme before the solos. This is

quintessential Garrick, as is the next track; a blues based number with an insistent locomotive inspired beat and muted Carr accompanied by Tony Coe on clarinet. 'Requiem' opens with solo piano followed by sax, bass and drums. Tony Coe solos here on tenor in his own inimitable style. 'Leprechaun Leap' has Joe Harriott soloing in *his* own inimitable fashion, where he is heard in as jovial mood as might be possible. 'Portrait of a Young Lady' is a 3 / 4 mid tempo tune that like most of the numbers here is hauntingly effective. The set closes in typically eccentric fashion with Garrick on eerie, child-like celeste backed by bass and drums.

To say this is an essential album in the canon of Michael Garrick is an understatement. It is almost certainly his best album and one of the most satisfying of all British jazz albums recorded in the last fifty years. Although it was previously reissued about five years ago by Universal in Japan only, this is the first time it has been reissued in the UK since it was recorded over 40 years ago. It is an unassuming but strangely powerful statement by Garrick and exemplifies his own qualities of modesty and imaginative creativity. Although over the years Michael Garrick has made recorded some of the finest albums ever to caress the ears of jazz lovers, 'Promises' in its own special way is probably his finest hour. **(Review by Roger Farbey)**

MILFORD GRAVES – *PERCUSSION ENSEMBLE*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: Nothing 5-7; Nothing 11-10; Nothing 19; Nothing 13; Nothing

Personnel: Milford Graves: drums, bells, gongs, shakers; Sunny Morgan: drums, bells

Additional Information: Recorded July, 1965.

This isn't really jazz at all, not only because of the absence of a melody instrument, but also because of the way it is constructed and the sounds that are used in its construction. That's not a criticism, just an observation; the record remains an intriguing listen. In what was an unusual session for the time (solo percussion is not the most popular format) Graves is joined by Sunny Morgan, one of the many little-known artists whose discography is often limited to a few dates on ESP records (although, in fairness, Morgan did go on to play with singer Leon Thomas in the 70s).

Perhaps the best way into the music on this occasion is with the comments of a critic. Allowing for a certain amount of hagiography ("just about the most brilliantly conceived and executed percussion album to date"), Valerie Wilmer's comments on the album in 'As Serious as Your Life' are worth quoting at length here. "Graves approaches percussion from a broader than average perspective," she writes: "the use of bells, gongs and shakers on the ESP album was, at the time, as much Indian-inspired as African... At the same time, Graves' use of Morgan in a subsidiary but contributing role heralded a whole new era of percussion. Coinciding with the growth of black nationalism and the need felt by many players to express their African background by including supplementary percussion devices, Grave's innovations were exemplary and well timed."

That's the background, then. The record itself is a little over thirty minutes long, and consists of five tracks. Wilmer suggests that Morgan is more an assistant than an equal partner: whatever the truth of that, his presence allows for a greater textural density than would have been possible on a solo date, though things remain crisp and clear throughout – there's never too much information coming at the listener at any one time. Clocking in at under three minutes, 'Nothing 5-7' serves as a sort of introduction to the record as a whole, a brief exercise for drums and gongs. 'Nothing 11-10' features what sounds like an African balafon accompanied by shakers and deep drum bangs, before the reverberations of a gong signal a change of pace, for a slower, more spacious approach. A build-up of rumbling toms renders the still-sounding balafon more eerie, less 'pastoral' than it was at first. In a wind-filled monastery, a man stands out, stands alone, contemplating the natural scenery around him – though attractive, it is overwhelming and dangerous. The track carries on with rumbles and occasional bells, woody beats and sparing use of cymbals.

'Nothing 19' opens with jangling bells over alternating drum patterns: the trance of chimes over the ritual reminder of the earth, cold and solemn. On the right stereo channel is a log drum, on the left channel a resonant, low-tuned companion. Embarkation, the beginning of a journey. Bells, shakers and cymbals complement the underling monolithic tapping tattoo. Wood skitters, the march is broken now into something approaching a call-and-response dialogue. A struck gong fades away, and the track ends.

'Nothing 13': drums batter and pound, the players' energy focussed in on the physicality of making sound. Gong tones don't so much punctuate the rhythmic hyperactivity as spiral off on a separate course, making new sentences of their own over

those that have already begun, overwriting without obscuring. All this multi-layering, this diversity of sound-sources, means that the ‘personality’ of the players isn’t always easily identifiable. The drums are being used here as a ritual instrument, while not performing any specific ritual, apart from the ritual of making music, the ritual of striking wood and striking metal. Rhythm, it’s true, is fundamental to the human being, but not on a consciously emotional level – at least, not in this unadorned, abstract exercise. That’s perhaps not Graves’ (healing) intention, but is what the music suggests to me. ‘Nothing’ is paradoxical – though we’d expect it to be negative, Zen and the whole 60s climate of thought leads us to suspect that it might be positive in this context. ‘Nothing’ – an absence of something – of what? Of self-assertive personality, of selfish ego, perhaps; though this music is very much concerned with, and created by, *persons*. The gong vibrates the last echoes away, unknowing, into the unknown of future silences.

‘Nothing,’ the final track on the record: a more structured dialogue, with Graves and Murray involved in virtuoso dashes from one drum to the other, exchanging volley salvos. Cymbals crash to fill up the silent pauses. Both men are responsive, on the move: another idea, another drum, overlapping ideas and patterns succeeding one another. Then gongs with their mysterious aura, pitched bells and others added on top. Things slow down, then the drums are back – yet the feel has changed, the listeners’ mood context is altered. A new sound, a scraping sound like a cricket, a natural sound, but with the impersonality, rather than the sustaining force, of nature. The scraping continues, silences the gongs and initiates a new phase of skittering drums, then falls silent. But, a few minutes later, it returns, eerie and insect-like, passages for gongs and drums alternating alongside it. Conclusion is sort for: this is, for me, some kind of highpoint on the record, as two gong pitches alternate and do end it, despite the cricket’s persistence.

‘Nothing’ has caused us to meditate, has ended up being the most human and yet the most mysterious of all the tracks on the record. So what to make of the album as a whole? Derek Taylor, in his review for Bagatellen, suggests that each piece tends to meander into an identical cul-de-sac, and certain effects are perhaps overused (the reverberating gong, for instance). I’d add that the music doesn’t have the sheer ecstatic playfulness of Graves’ and Sunny Murray’s freer playing. Still, it’s an intense, focussed record, which has no referent outside of itself – only sound – and that’s still quite hard to deal with. But it’s worth making the effort. **(Review by David Grundy)**

HENRY GRIMES TRIO – *THE CALL*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: Fish Story; For Django; Walk On; Saturday Night What Th’; The Call; Son of Alfalfa

Personnel: Perry Robinson: clarinet; Henry Grimes: bass; Tom Price: drums

Additional Information: Recorded December 26th, 1965.

For a long time the only album which featured Henry Grimes as a leader, 'The Call' makes its way onto the re-issue shelves with perhaps less of the mystique that it might have had a few years ago, before Grimes' reappearance on the scene. That's a good thing, I guess: it lets us focus exclusively on the music. This is a strain of free jazz which is often overlooked in blanket dismissals of an 'angry' style – it's a strain which doesn't shirk the dissonance or the difficulty, but is more prone to leave more space and to move at a slower pace. (Think John Tchicai, or Marion Brown.) The themes and textures can be quite 'sober' – at times, more like an 'enhanced' version of chamber jazz, perhaps due to the use of the clarinet, which can't help but evoke memories of Jimmy Giuffre's revelatory early 60s trio recordings. Perry Robinson is a different type of player, though, expressive and not at all reverent, his solos filled with expressive smears and trills.

Grimes' chattering arco bass makes for an inquisitive opening atmosphere to 'Fish Story', with Robinson swirling around in the lower registers of the clarinet. The entry of a stately, composed theme slows the pace down for a bit, but a lengthy pause, finally broken by a clarinet squawk, leads onto energetic improvisation. Tom Price is the weak link here, delivering a constant, rather boxy accompaniment that's not best suited to the changeable moods of this track. Robinson and Grimes are fine, however, and things pick up as they state the mournful theme of 'For Django' in unison. Price is more restrained, working within the flow of the music rather than keeping up a sustained, unchanging barrage of sound. He drops out and the subsequent clarinet/bass duet reminds me of the superlative work of Dolphy and Richard Davis. Robinson takes a solo, increasing the energy with repetitive phrases, played with a wonderful effect in which his tonguing makes notes seem to double back on themselves, and fast walking bass spurs him on to dance over Price's shuffling drum-set. Grimes' arco solo finds him mixing melodic lines with woozy parallel lines for upper and lower registers; Robinson briefly continues where he left off in his previous solo, but dies away in quiet fluttering notes, and Price's speeded-up funeral tapping re-introduces the theme's solemn melancholy.

'Walk On', a Robinson composition, is constructed in a similar manner to 'Fish Story': two phrases, one spicily dissonant, the other more buoyantly rhythmic. Up-tempo, scrabbling bass and drums create a mood half-way between jazzy exhilaration and a busy, more abstract tension, while Robinson swoops about, notes lolling around and crying out in protest as he moves between smooth articulations, upper register swells and low-end honks. 'Saturday Night What Th' is more rough and edgy, with solos for all the musicians. 'The Call' begins with the repetition of a short phrase as its theme. Robinson concentrates on a range of related figures, juxtaposed with brief screams. Tense and smart, the solo ends with a smeary sigh, languorous notes dragging themselves out of the instrument as if exhausted by the hyper-wired explorations that preceded them. Grimes plucks out his solo, before we hear, once more, Robinson's 'call'.

The concluding track, 'Son of Alfalfa' has the feel of Dolphy's 'South Street Exit'. A memorable phrase repeats several times, then we're into a short Grimes solo and Robinson starts worrying away at those compact little phrases again, building up to mini-climaxes with a trill and low note, up and on in little cycles that somehow manage to build up a cumulative intensity. Things get a little more abstract, and the return of the theme signals the end of the record. If Grimes is somewhat pushed into the background a little by Robinson, that doesn't make this date any less appealing. An enjoyable listen.

(Review by David Grundy)

THE BYARD LANCASTER UNIT – *LIVE AT MACALESTER COLLEGE*



Label: Porter Records

Tracklist: 1324; Last Summer; War World; Live at Macalester/ Bonus Tracks: World in Me; Thought.

Personnel: Byard Lancaster: horns; Sid Simmons: piano (2-4); Calvin Hill: bass (1, 5-6); Jerome Hunter: bass (2-4); Paul Morrison: electric bass (1); Lester Lumley: conga and percussion (1); J.R. Mitchell: percussion; Unidentified saxophonist, bass clarinetist, pianist and percussionists (5-6)

Additional Information: Track 1 recorded in Boston, MA, 1970. Tracks 2-4 recorded live at Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, 1971. Tracks 5-6 recorded in Boston, MA, 1973, by the J.R. Mitchell Experimental Unit. Album originally released on Dogtown Records in 1972.

An excellent re-issue from Luke Mosling's fine Porter Records, which has been releasing a wide variety of intriguing and obscure albums. Many of these originally appeared on small, and now defunct labels such as Sun Records and (in this case) Dogtown Records; the music mostly tends towards the experimental jazz end of the spectrum (with a strong Afrocentric vibe), but also including such delights as the lilting African vocals of Birigwa or Mosling's own electronic soundscapes. A prominent player on his local Philadelphia scene for several decades, Byard Lancaster is adept on a number of horns, several of which are played on this record. As he reveals in his liner notes Lancaster was involved in a burst of activity during 1966 and 1967, appearing on no less than six albums, some of them genuine free jazz classics: 'Intents and Purposes' by Bill Dixon, Marzette Watt's self-titled album on ESP, and 'Presenting Burton Greene', a rare instance of a major label recording free jazz. In these recordings, Lancaster employed a characteristically diverse range of approaches and instruments; he was flexible enough to adapt to different contexts without losing his own voice, and is a striking performer whether lending a Charlie Mariano-like alto to the Dixon album (which creates a distinct 'Black Saint and the Sinner Lady' vibe), or striking out with more extreme, noisier improvisations with the groups of Marzette Watts and Burton Greene. The striking black-and-white, hand-drawn cover art of 'Live at Macalester' (the artist is unfortunately not

credited), with its *mélange* of different black faces/ symbols of black consciousness and liberation, could be said to act as a visual equivalent to Lancaster's variety of approaches, disparate parts coming together to form a unified whole. As his business card puts it, his aim is to play music "from A Love Supreme to the Sex Machine" - sacred and secular, peaceful and agitated, soft and powerful, gentle and mighty.

Apparently this record was "the first avant-garde album in Philly," and Lancaster clearly believed (and believes) passionately in the virtues of black experimental music. His comments on the philosophy behind free jazz give a flavour of the style in which he writes the liner notes: "Our music carries The Message that is the Universal Brotherhood of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. All red, yellow, brown, white and black people must learn to live in the vibe of love...This CD is a simple sample of musicians speaking the music language of the 1960's. Then everyone had to say what was on their mind to be on time. We offered originality as homage to the advancement of humanity." Those are big aims, and it would be understandable if he became a little disillusioned at the lack of progress and recognition that he, and so many other artists had to suffer. It's not a surprise, then, when he admits that, as time went on, "I lightened up my style to please the masses," but now he claims to have a renewed enthusiasm for free jazz. Which is good news, and he promises a diverse approach, ranging from China, India, and South America to the Carribean and "North Philly Rap."

While the band name 'Byard Lancaster Unit' suggests Cecil Taylor, this music comes from a slightly different direction to Taylor's overwhelming torrents of detail. Things generally move in a straightforwardly linear direction, ideas coming one after the other, followed through to their conclusion, developed or discarded; theme-solos-theme gains the upper hand over collective playing (though there's a fair share of that too). The title is something of a misnomer - only three of the six pieces were actually recorded at Macalester College (though it must be noted that the CD contain additional material that did not appear on the original release).

'1324', apparently a studio track, gets things going. The rhythm section - electric and acoustic basses, drums, and conga - provides a churning, sometimes slightly muddy low end to the music which sets Lancaster's squalling, high-pitched improvisations in high relief. He's the only soloist on the 15-minute-plus track, and his playing, on a variety of different horns (alto and soprano sax, trumpet, and bass clarinet), is astonishingly direct. Even when he's ostensibly playing 'straight', it feels as though he's violating a whole set of rules - that he's somehow gone too far. There's a sense of what I can only call transgression - a combination of tone and attack which gives the impression of sheer, naked force being unleashed. By now means should this suggest that this is purely an aggressive approach, but there is something unadorned about it - this is utterly sincere expression, which doesn't need the protecting veil of any kind of extra-musical rhetoric as justification. It exists as a self-perpetuating, and self-generating entity that nevertheless could be said to resonate outwards, to reach out of itself and touch the listener. The occasional use of electronic effects - discreet touches of echo and reverb which were, presumably, treatments added on in the studio after the recording - only serves to enhance the strangeness of Lancaster's playing. It's a wonderful, incredibly candid piece of high-voltage free jazz flight, and reveals the abilities of a player who's tended to be rather neglected in histories of the music, remaining one of those names you

see from time to time cropping up in the discographies of better-known musicians, without really knowing much about them.

'Last Summer' begins the Live at Macalester section proper. A ballad reprised from Lancaster's 1968 album 'It's Not Up To Us', which featured Sonny Sharrock, this treatment doesn't differ that much from the studio recording, but it does provide a nice moment of repose after the energy of '1324', with Lancaster's soothing flute deftly complemented by Sid Simmons on piano. 'War World' launches back into the maelstrom, Lancaster laying down his stall over a stripped down backdrop of just J.R. Mitchell on percussion – in the vibe of such classics as Lowe/Ali's 'Duo Exchange' and Wright/Ali's 'Adieu Little Man' – before the rest of the band come in as well and take things out.

'Live at Macalester' opens with a Noah Howard flavour, Lancaster testifying the melody over a propulsive, gospelly rhythm section, and soon letting Sid Simmons ride the beat for a righteous piano solo, which, once it reaches its stomping climax, leads somewhat unexpectedly back into 'Last Summer', in a meltingly beautiful version that, to my ears, surpasses both the studio version on 'It's Not Up to Us' and the live version heard earlier on this record. Flute over arco bass is followed by a lovely, limpid piano solo, before blaring, fierce saxophone fires us into free jazz territory. The track fades out after ten minutes, with the bass stating the 'Last Summer' melody under Lancaster's urgent wails.

This re-issue also adds a couple of lengthy bonus tracks, recorded under the leadership of the percussionist on the previous tracks, and a frequent Lancaster collaborator, J.R. Mitchell. McCoy Tyner sideman Calvin Hill is on bass, but apart from him, Lancaster and Mitchell, the other musicians' names are unknown (these seems to be a bass clarinetist, saxophonist, pianist and additional percussionists). Saxes and clarinet state the imposing melody of 'World in Me' before things break loose into collective improvisation. The recording quality is not perfect, tending to privilege rhythm section over horns, and thus perhaps causing the music to lose some of the impact it might have had, but what can be heard is certainly impressive. Free jazz cacophony cedes to a purely rhythmic passage for African percussion that, to my ears, achieves the sort of 'authenticity' Pharaoh Sanders was seeking (and missing) on his 1970s Impulse albums (fantastic though those albums are, of course).

The melody of 'Thought', with its upward sweeps accentuated by rolling drums and throbbing bass, seeks to break out - the atmosphere of 'a change is going to/ has to come'. The template of the previous track is not followed, however; instead of letting loose as soon as the melodic statement is complete, the build-up is more patient, saxophone and bass clarinet in parallel improvisations which impart a fair sense of urgency while remaining within jazz-based phraseology – to start off, with at least. Of course, things increase in speed, volume and intensity – and the heavy wah-wah of a what sounds like an electric keyboard instrument (hard to tell, in the dense collective sound) assumes a greater prominence in the texture. Lancaster's solo, 'right-on' though it is, comes as something of an interlude before the next burst of collective blowing, and a piano solo takes things in a more jazzy direction. Calvin Hill skitters in and out of reach, and earshot, on electric bass, almost ceding place to J.R. Mitchell's dense 'accompaniment' on cymbals, before the main theme returns. A fade-out on the beginning of another solo suggests that things probably went on for a lot longer, and reinforces the

impression of this music as capable of endlessly rejuvenating itself, sustaining itself of its own energy.

Like Arthur Doyle's 'Alabama Feeling', one gets the feeling that the album has been pieced together from fragments – that's it's somehow incomplete as an artistic statement, like seeing the edge of a Picasso painting, which, however wonderful, can only be fully appreciated when seen as a whole. But perhaps that bits and pieces, snapshot approach enhances the whole ethos of the thing. I suspect that Lancaster's true impact can only be fully appreciated by hearing him live - and if that's also the case here, we can be glad that Lancaster is still performing, and with a renewed belief in the ideals and music he was making in the 60s and 70s.

(Review by David Grundy)

GUISEPPI LOGAN – *THE GUISEPPI LOGAN QUARTET*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: Tabla Suite; Dance of Satan; Dialogue; Taneous; Bleeker Partita

Personnel: Guiseppi Logan: Pakistani oboe (on track 1), tenor and alto sax; Don Pullen: piano; Eddie Gomez: bass; Milford Graves: drums, tabla

Additional Information: Recorded October 5th, 1964.

I feel churlish criticising this because now, every time I think of Guiseppi Logan, I think of his appearance on a recent video, taken by a Christian mission team in New York City: a frail, sunken-cheeked, white-bearded old man, holding onto his saxophone, he has clearly been through a lot, and is hopefully on the verge of making a come-back (rumours are that he attended the latest Vision Festival). His life story reveals the pressures of being a free jazz musician in the 1960s – economic, emotional and political. A long period of absence and homelessness, during which he disappeared from the scene and was presumed dead, connects him with such figures as Charles Gayle, Sonny Simmons and Henry Grimes. Perhaps religion had something to do with his burn-out, as it did with Ayler – in the video he's talking about his faith.

Whatever the reasons (and, by all accounts, they may be personal as much as anything – he reportedly had quite a temper on him), he was highly respected by many in the avant-garde, regarded by some as a mentor and by others, such as Bill Dixon, as a very fine player. Now Dixon is a formidable musical talent, and hardly like to heap praise on a below-par artist. And, on this date, Logan is joined by a fine group of musicians– the young Milford Graves, phenomenal pianist Don Pullen, and bassist Eddie Gomez, who would move onto more straight-ahead work after this free period.

Yet I have to judge by the evidence of my own ears, and, to me, the leader is the weak link in his own quartet. Often, much of the solo space is left for his sidemen – something which is even pronounced on 'More', where, for instance, he barely plays on

the near fifteen-minute 'Shebar.' When he does solo (as on 'Dance of Satan') he appears to run out of ideas fairly quickly, having to return to the original melody or repeat a particular phrase while preparing his next foray.

Perhaps the problem is that Logan spreads himself too thin in playing so many different horns (three on this date, and an additional two on 'More'), maintaining a certain textural interest throughout, but without really developing a compelling voice on any one instrument in particular. Indeed, for me, the best track across his two ESP releases is 'Curveball', the piano solo on 'More', in which he demonstrates a far greater technical proficiency and variety of expression than on the reeds, as he moves from piano bashing to surreal stride to classically-tinged impressionism in an attractively discursive manner – almost haphazard but with great discipline.

'Tabla Suite' features Milford Graves on the Indian tablas, before they had become widespread currency through inclusion in psychedelic rock music, while Logan plays a Pakistani oboe, which has a timbre somewhat akin to that of a bagpipe. Such instrumentation indicates an interest in musics beyond the American or European traditions that characterised much of the free jazz movement, but this is arguably one of the less successful manifestations of that trend. Critic Barry McRae, in a 1965 *Jazz Journal* review of a number of new ESP-disk releases, notes the problem Logan faced in trying to adopt the instrument to western standards. Coltrane's oriental flavours on the soprano sax had approached things from a different direction – moving out from the western tradition (in this case, a particularly banal musical song) and imbuing it with exoticism. Logan tries the opposite: working in from non-western tradition, but it seems clear that he doesn't have a necessary grasp of the complexities of Indian and Pakistani music for such an approach to pay off. Pullen is probably the best thing about the track: his piano includes various preparations, and he adds slithery high scraps and rumbling low menace which offers portents of doom. The tablas, meanwhile, are surprisingly backgrounded, despite the title. Logan doesn't play for long, but, instead of taking the lead and playing soloistically, as one might have expected him to do, Pullen is content to leave shivering shards and low-end punctuations over a rhythmic quest from Gomez and Graves, contributing an atmosphere of mysterious dread. Graves gets a brief tabla solo, Gomez on bass playing figures behind it that are somewhat reminiscent of those heard in Scott La Faro and Charlie Haden's duet on Ornette Coleman's 'Free Jazz'. Logan returns, much as before, while, underneath, the stop-start bass prevents continual momentum, in a deliberate maintenance of tension.

'Dialogue' finds Logan switching to saxophone. A vaguely Spanish-sounding vamp is introduced and repeated over rich, dark piano and drums. Logan's solo brings in jazzy phrases at times, but he seems to run out of ideas, not capable of sustained flight of elongated invention, and keeps returning to the theme in order to refresh himself, preparing himself for another brief excursion. And whereas one might cite Monk as a precedent, his solos often sticking very close to the contours of the melody, it sounds like Logan doesn't *want* to adopt this approach; he *wants* to break free, but finds himself unable to do so for long periods. Thus, the music sits uneasily between straight jazz and more abstract sounds, and one can't help but feel that Logan does not have the ability, or the willingness, to *really* go out there as Ayler would do.

'Dance of Satan' is the most memorable tune: having compared him unfavourably to Ayler just now, I will note that Logan's statement of the melody has an Aylereque

plaintiveness about it. A more lyrical, secondary theme has a repetitive rhythmic quality similar to that of 'Dialogue', but Logan's solo is focussed on the opening mood, as Pullen rushes up and down the piano behind him in support. Gomez leaves lots of space, but his presence very much prevents the music from stasis, with his high-pitched plucking really adding tension. Now the lyrical melody again – Logan's playing sounds slightly out-of-tune, somewhat awkwardly articulated, 'naïve.' Perhaps this is deliberate – yet, despite his reputation as player and teacher (attested to by references in Valerie Wilmer's 'As Serious as Your Life'), I can't help feeling that the actual recording is something of a disappointment – there's something lacking. I just don't find that Logan has very interesting ideas, and doesn't really develop them in his playing – it's almost as if he's noodling, without a direction. I'm not meaning to question his integrity – I'm sure he *felt* this music (and feeling, I'm told, is paramount in free jazz), I'm sure he played his experience, but it just doesn't connect with me. Pullen's piano playing is probably the best thing about the date, but the sound is rendered boxy – the piano doesn't sound in very good shape, probably due to ESP's financial resources not being the best as Stollman committed to recording as much of this unpopular music as he could. (Corners, I'm sure, had to be cut, and frequently too.)

Still, 'Bleeker Partita' is a better track, probably because it commits to a straighter approach, without the indecision between freeform and straight jazz that characterises the other pieces. Logan's solo evolves into a series of Oriental-style clarion calls; Pullen's more lengthy solo traces a nice path between the 'inside' and the 'outside', and, on Logan's return, the track ends with a surprising, but effective, introverted conclusion. The mood is haunting, and the sound is weirdly reedy and exotic – Logan's slightly askew playing has some charm here, and some power too. It's just a shame that it takes nearly the whole record for that to happen. Don't get me wrong, this is an important historical document – Logan is a near-legendary figure in free jazz circles, and I'm sure many will want to hear this to see what all the fuss was about – but I do have some serious reservations about the music. **(Review by David Grundy)**

FRANK LOWE – *BLACK BEINGS*



Label: ESP-Disk

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: In Trane's Name; Brother Joseph; Thulani

Personnel: Frank Lowe: tenor sax; Joseph Jarman: soprano & alto sax; The Wizard (Raymond Lee Cheng): violin; William Parker: bass; Rashid Sinan; drums

Additional Information: Recorded live in New York, 1973. Originally released 1973, with tracks 1 & 3 edited down to LP length.

In an interview, Lowe claimed this was the sort of exercise in beyond-'Ascension' free jazz blowout that he wouldn't want to be engaged in all the time – witness his other work, in other contexts, in which he demonstrates an openness to many different forms of

music. So this is a kind of exorcism? If so (and even if it not), it retains a remarkable freshness. Despite Jarman's presence, the ethos is less that of the AACM than New York 'fire music' – and it does *burn*.

'In Trane's Name': thirty-three minutes (re-expanded to its original length, having been edited on the LP release), Jarman and Lowe state the theme, Raymond Lee Cheng alternates between joining them and whizzing off into buzzing upward runs while Parker boils and bubbles and Sinan rolls over and over, tumbling over himself in packed little pent-up cycles. Parker's bass (this was his recording debut) is astonishingly energetic and the rhythm section *really* cooks, *really* drives things. Lowe solos, starts off intoning, then is wail-rasping into the righteous terror of a multiphonic tenor language, repeating and roiling while drums beat for hell for leather for life. Jarman's solo immediately differs, centering at first around the theme, now made thoughtful, pensive, Jarman considering the implications of Low's blasting, rising himself, rhythm section urging him on into honk/high/low(e) scream territory, rhythmic, some things learned from Trane, now squeaked hints of the thematic phrase come back in, he remembers the introductory register of his opening and goes into that –

and then over the top screams in an amazing (and previously unreleased) violin solo, Cheng 'The Wizard' on an instrument that's electrified like a guitar, on one (or a couple) of strings repeat obsessively pluck, then bowed and really electrified wiz up and down with bizarre distorted tone giving real urgency and almost apocalyptic fervour (burn baby burn!) to the solo as it constantly threatens to go manic and erupt into...what? As if in realization, Cheng brings in little melodic fragments mockingly, Hendrix Star Spangled Banner fashion, impossibly competing against Parker's woofing bass and the still repeating drums, cycle up to cymbals down to feet up again...wah-wah pedal now *aches* and cat squals, the uh violin now a note box, no a sound box, setting more flames to the romantic parlour instrument whose ghost burns at its feet. More devilish than Paganini, anyway...

Parker's bowing now, now he's about to briefly solo, but a commanding cymbal shot silences him as Sinan embarks on the solo he's been bursting to deliver throughout, shouts go up, yes he revels/ obsessing over a single tom rhythm while round it he complements (a complimentary snare blast to go with your tom, sir?), with it cymbals' climaxes, then out of nowhere springs Lowe shrieking, then Jarman in the other ear, and Cheng too in abstract pursuit of lines while drums continue on that rhythm. Jarman the lyrical bent again, Lowe just (just!) shrieking, Jarman hinting/ at the melody, Cheng almost lost as all music as all musicians compete for the ears' attention/ now both saxes screaming now Jarman he's off on one / high note-fly flight and Lowe's barking at him and Cheng's rolling a rolled theme with garbled electrocuted wah-wahed messages from inside his own head and it's true creative dialogue and it's impossible to follow, to separate, and it's an ensemble music built of individually competing complex lines and it is a collective whole that screams itself in and out of existence and can't be notated and really is free

Jarman is (marginally) the straight man in this and his thematic hints again lead Lowe to *preach* it (the theme) while Cheng dribbles it half-crazy hysteric drunk in the background but then they're off again – Lowe: aaaow! ahwww! aooohw! Jarman on the theme, now scream, Lowe still awooorwoor**worrwoorworr**

Eventually after so many promises they all return to the theme, stated with the authority of the struggle, a message proclaimed. Lowe has that authority about his playing that Coltrane, Pharoah, Ayler, have – he’s *telling* you, he’s *teaching* you, he’s a preacher, a yelp as they end. How the fuck do you follow that?

With ‘Brother Joseph’, a tribute piece again, but it’s not distant respectful...A voice in the middle of a conversation drops out as Jarman begins an alto solo, tender, gruff low blow under, gush in air (human physical presence), yer, uh (ayeer) squawks he means it, overblowing it, a phrase of crystal beauty. ‘yeah, baby’, the voice. now the roof comes *screaming* down, altissimo with woof/vocalized bark and the theme so tender back in, a trill yearning up to a held note to end (‘oh yeah’).

‘Thulani’: fade in mid-way through Cheng scrap(p)ing over boomy Parker bass, then sax unison theme – powerful, authoritative, yet with an almost vulnerable feel to it. Even here, Lowe can’t resist throwing in a few yawls. He’s fractionally ahead of Jarman, seems to want to get ahead and blow free as soon as possible, and is off on one as Jarman still states the theme, seemingly oblivious to the man speaking in tongues next to him on stage. Lowe with rhythm section; Jarman back in with the melody, on soprano this time; now both screaming – Jarman pierces right through, high, piped. The pain is of expressing to the limit and still wanting to go further; of knowing that what you’re expressing is never quite enough, yet, it seems, as far as it is possible to go. “Nearly too much/ is, well, not nearly enough.” Now Cheng’s lyricism provides a needed relief; suddenly, in what sounds like a cut, he kicks in with the electrified, wah-wah sound, jump out of seat, Cheng going mad. Saxophonists trilling upwards, Lowe abandons trills for yawlings, Jarman takes an soprano solo, high and piercing, yet, again, almost wistful, vulnerable. The melody, as it comes back in now with him and Lowe in unison, yearns upward to a high note. Lowe gruffbursts overbrimming with emotion. Buy this record.
(Review by David Grundy)

JACKIE McLEAN– *NEW AND OLD GOSPEL*



Label: Blue Note

Release Date: July 2007

Tracklist: Lifeline (A: Offspring; B: Midway; C: Vernzone; D: The Inevitable End); Old Gospel; Strange as It Seems

Personnel: Ornette Coleman: trumpet; Jackie McLean: alto sax; Lamont Johnson: piano; Scotty Holt: bass; Billy Higgins: drums

Additional Information: Recorded March 24th, 1967. Originally issued in 1968.

A re-release for a McLean album that is most famous – well, notorious – for featuring Ornette Coleman on trumpet. The words ‘acquired taste’ spring immediately to mind –and, to be sure, this does feel like something of a missed opportunity, a session which invariably raises several ‘what ifs’. What if Ornette had chosen to saxophone and we’d got to hear these two approaches to the alto, so different yet so convincing, side-by-

side and head-to-head? What if Cecil Taylor hadn't declined the offer to play on the date? But at the same time, this leads us away from what is really an extremely good album, brimming with soul and adventure, and it might also force us to over-generalise about Coleman's approach to the trumpet. As Bob Blumenthal notes in his new liner notes, "Coleman bends to tradition and convention far more here than in other [sideman] settings, and on one of his recently acquired instruments at that, and a fresh listen to this music confirms that his success is both genuine and more valuable than is often acknowledged." While this apparent equivalence between "tradition and convention" and success is something I'd query, it's certainly true that this is not merely an untrained, slapdash approach, nor even one as askew (unhinged?) as that of a free jazz player like Alan Shorter; it charts its way through recognizably jazz-based territory, while maintaining a healthy disregard for following 'correct' procedure to the letter.

'Lifeline,' a McLean composition, filled the whole first side of the original LP. It has what looks like a rather involved suite structure to it, and is something to do with the journey of life, as painstakingly revealed in the liner notes (I seem to remember there was a much more modest piece which had that kind of thinking behind it on Dave Brubeck's 'Gone with the Wind'!) Perhaps it's best enjoyed just as music though, traversing a whole range of emotions and colours. Things begin with a bang, McLean's sharp, cutting alto and Coleman's brash, bursting trumpet in a clarion-call unison that threatens to burst apart at any moment. Both players get in wild workouts, pianist Lamont Johnson picking up on a hint of a demented bebop run in Coleman's smeary trumpet blasts and responding in kind. Things quieten down for a ballad section, 'Midway', introduced by Johnson's rich piano chords and Holt's arco bass, and developing in a theme of the most exquisite, mournful beauty. Ornette's trumpet solo here is perhaps the best he's laid down on record – muted and concentrating on notes so low they can barely be heard, with an occasional fragile venture into the upper register bringing to mind none other than Miles Davis, who was publicly so critical of Ornette's decision to play the instrument. When McLean comes in alongside him and ratchets up the intensity, the effect is one of the utmost artful construction, yet with the organic, natural quality that informs so much of both front-men's playing.

It's notable how much space McLean cedes to Coleman – not many would have been brave enough to risk the critical opprobrium this move earned, but, for this listener at least, it paid off. Ornette has certain phrases, or certain ways of phrasing – licks, I guess you'd call them – that occur in virtually all of his alto solos, but his trumpet playing, though it does hint at these, is far more concerned with sound than with line (of course, the flowing, smeared quality of the saxophone playing goes some way towards blurring the idea of line too). The same essential quality, albeit from a very different angle, is illustrated in a more technically proficient way via McLean's alternation of piercing held high notes and steely low-register runs and honks as he solos over 'Vernzone.' The final part of the track, 'The Inevitable End', eventually ends with just the sound of his desolate alto and Coleman's muffled, held notes, which no more than hint at a cracking at the edges in a way that nevertheless is deeply affecting. Nat Henthoff thinks that these sounds might be "part of the climate of a Samuel Beckett novel or play" – I'm not sure they're quite that desolate, but it's an interesting comparison.

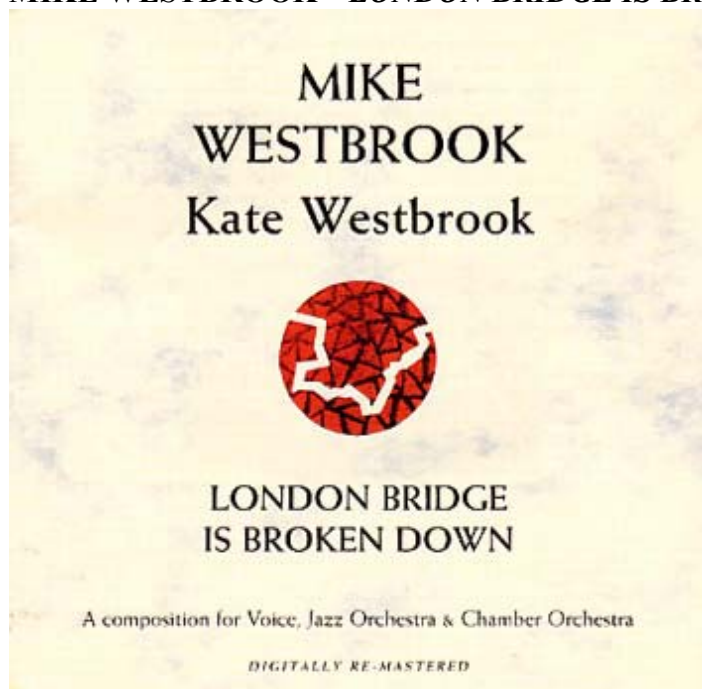
What would originally have been the second side of the record consists of two Coleman compositions. 'Old Gospel' is a rollicking delight, a tune of Coleman's based

around a set of gospelly piano chords underlain by a thumping Billy Higgins beat. The exuberance is maintained throughout, particularly highlights occurring when McLean, near the end of his opening solo, plays a section entirely in the altissimo register, and throughout Lamont Johnson's piano solo, which is just a sheer delight, its churchy earthiness, its roiling, rolling chords hinting at the pure joy that comes through in the best gospel music.

To me, it seems that 'Old Gospel' is about the body, about the beat, about bleats of joy, about an almost unthinking affirmation of life (as Ornette is quoted in the liner notes, "it's not about being good or bad. It's about *being*"). 'Strange as It Seems' is less certain of itself, landing us back into the mysterious territory that informed McLean's 'Lifeline' suite. The atmosphere is one of contemplation, hope touched by the merest twinges of doubt – it speaks of openness, of horizons, of reaching forth – and, while the rhythm section makes things a little more buoyantly jazzy for the solos, Ornette's trumpet has a beautiful strangeness about it that constantly creates the unexpected, particularly while he speculates in free tempo over McLean's arching interpretation of the melody.

If I've concentrated almost exclusively on the two front-men, it's because they are clearly the primary focus of the record. But, though the names of Lamont Johnson and Scott Holt aren't the best known, they probably provide support-work just as proficient as that of the Ron Carters and Tony Williams of this world – or, at least, even if they're not quite as overtly *brilliant*, they give the music exactly what it needs. Appropriately enough, given the title, 'New and Old Gospel' is a record of revelations, and I can't recommend it highly enough. **(Review by David Grundy)**

MIKE WESTBROOK – LONDON BRIDGE IS BROKEN DOWN



Label: BGO

Release Date: June 2008

Tracklist: London Bridge; Wenceslas Square; Berlin Wall (Nahe des Geliebten/ B.V.B.W. (Belle-Vue Berlin Wall)/ Traurig aber falsch). DISC 2: Berlin Wall (cont.) (Ein Vogel); Vienna; Picardie (Blighters/ Les Morts/ Picardie Three/ Picardie Four/ Une Fentre/ Picardie Six/ Aucassin et Nicolette)

Personnel: Mike Westbrook (piano); Kate Westbrook (voice); Chris Biscoe (alto, soprano & baritone sax, alto clarinet); Brian Godding (guitar); Paul Nieman (trombone, electronics); Peter Whyman (alto & soprano sax, clarinet); Graham Russell (trumpet, flugelhorn, piccolo trumpet); Tony Marsh (drums); Steve Cook (bass); Le Sinfonietta De Picardi, Conducted by Constantin Bobesco

Additional Information: Originally issued in 1987 on Virgin Records.

A welcome re-issue of Mike Westbrook's ambitious suite, originally issued on three LPs, and here taking up two CDs. In the interview with the Westbrooks printed in the last issue of 'eartrip', they claimed it as one of their most important works, and, true enough, its scope is matched by its execution. Having been mooted as much as two years beforehand, it was officially commissioned in 1986 by Michel Orier, the director of Amiens' Temps Du Jazz Festival, with the jazz/classical relationship very much in mind (Le Sinfonietta, the regional chamber orchestra of the Picardy region was mentioned as part of a collaboration). The work that resulted brings together an interest in cross-generic fertilization, a cosmopolitan outlook that incorporates literature in three different languages, and a subtle, but sharp, concern with contemporary political developments, as well as featuring some of the most intelligent and non-soupy string writing that a jazz composer has managed to deliver. One thing that's immediately worth noting is the collaborative skill that Mike and Kate have in setting words, often literary, to styles of music that wouldn't normally be associated with them. The concepts can be quite simple, as in 'Blighters', which sticks to a fairly close approximation of Siegfried Sassoon's bitter music-hall parody, but they always feel *right*. Like poetry itself, in fact, a happy medium is reached – not quite 'natural' speech, but not stilted – an organic form of unaffected artifice.

The suite is divided into five different sections, of varying lengths, which chart various points in the Westbrooks' travels around Europe, and embody various states of mind and concerns. The titular first section arose from Kate Westbrook's reading of some background information on the traditional song 'London Bridge', in Peter and Ioana Opie's book on nursery rhymes. There was a rumour that a child was built into the bridge as a superstitious protection against catastrophe, and, in Kate's hands, this becomes a metaphor for the increasingly desperate measures taken in Thatcher's Britain to keep the country going at the expense of the people. Musically, this manifests itself as a dialogue (both voices being Kate's) between a booming Thatcherite figure and a cockney woman, with the demands for protecting the bridge growing ever more ominous and extreme. It's very much a reminder of the relationship between jazz and politics, without the one overwhelming the other in a descent into posturing rhetoric. And it's not simple symbolism either – the bridge also foreshadows the concerns of the work as a whole, about the state of Europe as the Cold War waned, and about 'bridges' over the Iron Curtain, and between Britain and the mainland (Thatcher's being a strongly Euro-sceptic government). Walls keep out, bridges bring together – but the construction of these bridges may involve disturbing events, and their collapse closes off, just as collapsing walls open up.

It all evokes the uncertainty of the time period, the mid to late 1980s, in which the collapse of Communist totalitarianism and rise of capitalism produced moments which are still watershed for us all. I find it hard to think of a comparable work which addresses such issues with such a breadth of reference and depth of emotion, even within the generally more 'lofty' aspirations of the classical world.

'Wenceslas Square', an instrumental movement, follows. As an example of the rich textural effects created by Mike's score, it's a fine one: Pete Whyman's soprano sax comes across as at once a fore-grounded solo commentary and another part of the general landscape, the ghostly echo of a 'hot' jazz solo drifting over the square which had witnessed, and was to witness, events of great political significance. The repeating rocky bass-line and undulating strings both lull and tense, creating a sense of inexorable build-up: something is about to happen. Yet 'London Bridge' frequently does the unexpected, and the outburst, when it comes, doesn't fully release this tension, as Tony Marsh trades drum salvos with the ensemble. A change of pace finds alto sax sounding over piano jazz and a 'swinging' trombone riff, the saxophone played fairly 'straight' but with Dolphy-esque forays between extremes of register. This evolves into an alto duet, somewhat reminiscent of the opening of Mingus 'Bird Calls', the background a repeating turmoil; and more unexpected twists and turns follow. In a work of great length, variety is important, and Mike manages this at the same time as ensuring that he doesn't switch moods or colours just for the sake of it – that all the ideas make sense as part of a wider musical argument.

I'll skip over 'Berlin Wall' and 'Vienna', not because they're unworthy, but because this review would go on for pages if I chronicled all the impressions I've jotted down about them – though I will note that 'Fur Sie' is a particularly nice version of a film noir score (it apparently began life as soundtrack material), and that there are fine soloistic contributions from reeds players Chris Biscoe and Pete Whyman, trombonist Paul Niemann, and guitarist Brian Godding (both Niemann and Godding use electronic effects sparingly, but effectively, adding yet another layer of richness to the ensemble sound).

That brings us to the fifth and final section, 'Picardie', which consists of a series of shorter pieces. It could be posited that the seven movements included herein chart a gradual evolution from sorrow to hope, from the uncertainty of Cold War Europe to the possibility of progress and renewal after the fall of totalitarianism, from the despairing and grotesque war poems of Siegfried Sassoon and Rene Arcos to the rousing, life-affirming strains of a 12th century Picardie song. But, as one might have come to expect from this work by now, things are not as simple as that. The Velvet Revolution demonstrations that took place in Wenceslas square had not even happened when Mike Westbrook wrote his piece – in that sense, it's strangely prophetic – and thus, perhaps, a more balanced, distanced perspective was possible: one might worry about Europe's future direction, rather than being caught up in the euphoria surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall and embracing a Capitalism just as rampant and just as insensible of the needs of the disadvantaged (if not more so). In any case, as indicated by the oblique parallels with the state of Thatcherite England in the opening movement, 'London Bridge', such concern runs throughout the work.

Kate delivers Siegfried Sassoon's 'Blighter's, with its condemnation of British music hall tradition, followed by another anti-war piece, Rene Arcos' 'Les Morts', which centres itself around a bleak drone. The same drone continues without a pause into 'Picardie Three', where Nieman's electronically modified trombone echoes alongside Brian Godding's hanging guitar tones, their eerie sounds then swirling round a violin duet, out of which emerges a gently pulsating rhythm in the strings, giving the impression of a slow, ghostly dance, before the entry of Tony Marsh's drumset sees the piece evolve

into a near-cacophonous melee whose most prominent textural element is the dual wail of Chris Biscoe and Pete Whyman's soprano saxophones.

'Picardie Four' functions as a sort of interlude - downcast oboe alternates with viola and cello before a brief burst of jagged, anguished strings signals the vaguely troubled half-lullaby of Mike Westbrook's piano chords, creating the sort of atmosphere so often expertly conjured on these discs. Kate's voicing of Andre Chedid's 'Une Fentre ou se Pencher' (A Window to Lean Out Of) is accompanied by Chris Biscoe's soprano sax and by cyclical string patterns, complementing the piano's course. The piece seems to suggest some sort of search for a reconciliation of the issues dealt with previously: the speaker seeks to reject the path of human suffering and failure ("Je ne crois plus aux naufrages" (I no longer believe in lives going under)). Yet glimpses of utopia are at best unrealistic (and patriarchal) - "Les porteuses de pain se succedent" (Women will bring bread without end) - and at worst, profoundly ambiguous - "Il y a un masque bleu au fond de tous les puits" (In the depth of every well is a blue mask). Appropriately, then, the last line is a question, and the metaphor preceding it echoes the vaguely sinister mask image: "Quelque part existe le visage de notre terre./ Qui nous dira son nom?" (Somewhere is the face of our land. / Who will tell us its name?)

Biscoe's solo continues into 'Picardie Six', the third of the instrumental 'interludes' in the 'Picardie' section: perhaps it would be better to call them 'commentaries', extensions of the ideas raised by the vocal/text pieces, addressed in a more abstract sense. And then we enter the finale, 'Aucussin et Nicolette', a setting of a traditional Picardie song which seems to be an affirmative, positive close to a generally very bleak work, acknowledging (and even delighting) in human frailty in down-to-earth language (Maxine Relton and Kate Westbrook's translation includes phrases like "the bollock-naked and shoeless"). At the same time, it could be said to constitute some sort of social critique, in the subversive way that folk texts so often do - a kind of endemic distrust of authority that sees hell populated by "posh men of learning, handsome knights, brave soldiers and toffs, harpists, jugglers, Kings of the world", while "them as is dying of hunger, thirst, cold, misery" - in other words, those who suffer at the hands of the privileged - make it through the pearly gates.

Pete Whyman's clarinet solo captures this double-edged quality, treading a line between joyful exuberance and manic hysteria. The propulsive rhythmic jolts which accompany Westbrook's vocals at times bringing to mind hard rock, and, like Whyman's playing, seem as if they might spiral completely out of control at any moment. Eventually, a big band brass stab brings things to a decidedly ambivalent close.

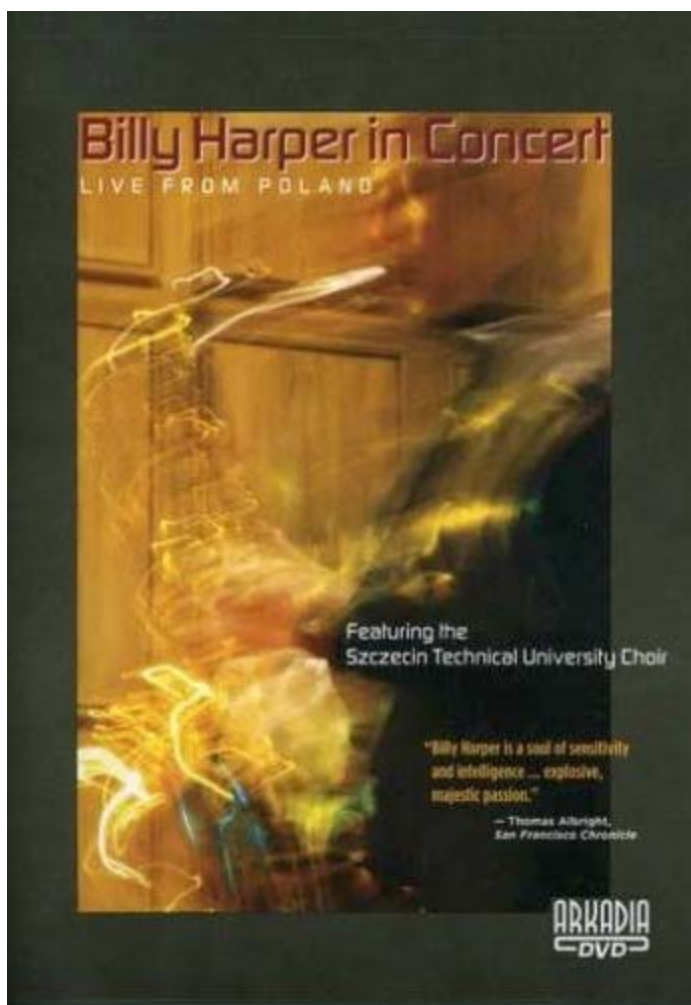
BGO's presentation is suitably thorough - a hefty booklet includes full personnel details and lyrics in English, French and German (though to call them lyrics belies their artistic intent - these aren't just the work of Broadway songsmiths, but a wide and, as well always, carefully-selected range of poems from different contexts and cultures, which all share common ground - the common ground that Mike's music brings out). Alyn Shipton's new liner notes provide some useful background information on how the work came to be written, though they rather skimp on analysis of the music itself. I suppose he judged - perhaps rightly - that the listener should make of it what they will, and 'London Bridge' is indeed direct and easily comprehensible in its appeal, at the same time as being, in the words of The Wire's Chris Parker "a major work which operates on many

levels, incorporating a stunning variety of textures and moods into a deeply satisfying dramatic whole."

(Review by David Grundy)

DVDs

BILLY HARPER – *IN CONCERT: LIVE IN POLAND* (2007)



Label: Arkadia; V.I.E.W. Video

Release Date: July 2007

Tracklist: Light Within; Speak to Me of Love, Speak to Me of Truth; Thy Will be Done; Quest; The Awakening; Cry of Hunger

Personnel: Billy Harper: tenor sax, cowbell; Piotr Wojtasik: trumpet; Francesca Tanskley: piano; Clarence Seay: bass; Newman Taylor Baker: drums; The Szczecin Technical University Choir, cond. Szymon Wyrzkowski.

Additional Information: DVD includes bonus concert performance of 'It Came Upon a Midnight Clear', photo gallery and Billy Harper biography.

As every review of Billy Harper's work inevitably ends up stating, this man is underrated, seriously underrated. He must be sick of the term by now, and indicated as much in a recent interview for Allaboutjazz.com, where he patiently explained how, by branding him in such a manner, reviewers are effectively relegating him to permanent underdog status, however good their intentions. You can understand his frustration: he's being treated in the same way as a minor talent, or an up-and-coming figure, new to the scene, yet he's steadily turned out fine release after fine release since the early 70s. Though his recordings have achieved cult classics status within a certain audience, and 'Black Saint' inaugurated the label of the same name, the majority of jazz listeners are unlikely to have heard more than a very small amount of his music, or even to know who he is. So it's predictable that this DVD didn't make much of a splash in the jazz press, and that's a shame, because it contains music of the usual excellent standard you can expect from Harper.

The visual element, for me, doesn't really add anything to the music – indeed, it perhaps diminishes the 'pictures in your mind' that Harper's work, in audio-only format, might summon. The Metropolitan Basilica Cathedral of St Jacob in Szczecin, Poland, is grandly-named, and the notes on the back of the DVD talk about its "gothic brilliance," but the interior, with its red-brick, isn't the most attractive, and, though some might argue that it is an entirely appropriate for Harper's music, with its religiously-minded grandeur, it also misses out on the more down-home aspects, the black popular music vernacular that Harper fused with the more elevated concerns he tends to foreground. His concert get-up emphasises that mixture: a long, flowing black leather coat, a bizarre mode of dress that he was adopting as far back as 1973 (he's wearing it on the cover of the needlessly out-of-print 'Capra Black'), which seems to mix the preacher and the pimp, and perhaps hints at the dashiki, in a nod to Afro-centric concerns. There's also more than a whiff of the Blaxploitation picture about it.

The music itself is superb – the choir, though not used in a particularly adventurous way, continues Harper's use of voices for dramatic shading and colouring – listen to the way they augment the brass and the quintet on the superb 'Light Within', the highlight of the concert. Inevitably, Harper's best-known composition, 'Cry of Hunger,' gets a run out, and remains as powerful and moving as ever. While I'm not familiar enough with the supporting musicians to comment on them at great length, they perform more than capably – and have been supporting Harper for years. His sidemen have sometimes been somewhat obscure (although, of course, on 'Capra Black' he had Grachan Moncur, Billy Cobham and Elvin Jones, hardly little-known figures!), but always up to the challenge of the music, and that's no different here. It's time for Billy Harper to start getting the appreciation he deserves.

(Review by David Grundy)

BOOKS

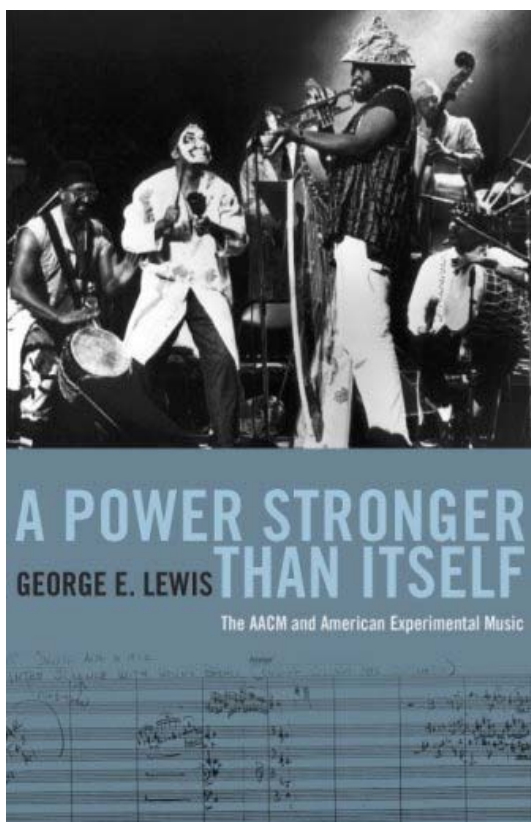
GEORGE LEWIS - *A POWER STRONG THAN ITSELF: THE AACM AND AMERICAN EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC*

Publisher: University of Chicago Press

Publishing Date: 2008

Number of Pages: 676 (incl. index)

Contents: Preface; Acknowledgments; Introduction; Chapter Summaries; Chapter 1 – Foundations and Prehistory; Chapter 2 – New Music, New York; Chapter 3 – The Development of The Experimental Band; Chapter 4 – Founding the Collective; Chapter 5 – First Fruits; Chapter 6 – The AACM Takes Off; Chapter 7 – Americans in Paris; Chapter 8 – The AACM’s Next Wave; Chapter 9 – The AACM in New York; Chapter 10 – The New Regime in Chicago; Chapter 11 – Into the Third Decade; Chapter 12 – Transition and Reflections; Afterword; Appendices; Notes; Bibliography; Index



The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians is an organisation of some importance: even its detractors must acknowledge the validity of that statement. Over the years, its ranks have included Muhal Richard Abrams, Anthony Braxton, Roscoe Mitchell, Joseph Jarman, Famoudou Don Moye, Lester Bowie, Amina Claudine Myers, Fred Anderson, Leroy Jenkins, John Stubblefield, Pete Cosey, Wadada Leo Smith, Henry Threadgill – and those are just some of the best-known. Yet, despite documentation and coverage in recordings, journalistic and scholarly articles, and references in academic books, ‘A Power Stronger than Itself’ is the first full-length study of its kind, written by an AACM member who also happens to be a fine academic writer, and who has meticulously researched both the specific and wider contexts of the AACM’s genesis, from the background of economic depression in 1930s Chicago to the present day situation.

‘A Power Stronger than Itself’ is much more than just a historical curiosity; in fact, I’d argue that it is one of the most important books about jazz ever written, and is worthy of the attention of anyone who claims to be serious about the music. Lewis is an academic who actually says something through the complexity of his discourse, and is not a vacuous or pretentious name-dropper (his relation of Theodor Adorno and Jacques Attali to what he’s talking about is very much to the point and not put in for some intellectual brownie points). I feel this important to assert because of the rather snobby dismissals I’ve read in various publications, which, dare I say it, come from exactly the sort of views he critiques in the book. A black musician talking about jazz in academic terms? That’s not his place – he must be doing something wrong.

This review can only claim to cover a small number of the issues addressed by Lewis; there’s simply no way that I can write about everything that I had jotted down as an area of immediate interest when reading through for the first time. So, where to begin? Let’s dive straight into controversy...

The issue of race will undoubtedly be raised, with the AACM criticised as an exclusive black-only club. In chapter 6, Lewis brings to light the case of Gordon Emanuel, a vibes player who was the organisation’s only white member (though he regarded himself as essentially black, being the adopted brother of bassist Bob Cranshaw

and living in the South Side's black ghetto). Growing pressures from black nationalists in the group eventually forced a meeting, in which Emanuel was voted out of the organisation. This will provide plenty of ammunition for those who want to argue that AACM members, in combating the detrimental effects of anti-black racism, turned the racism back on white people; indeed, at the time, Leslie Rout argued that the incident showed how, "in the final analysis, all white men are enemies [to the AACM]." Amina Myers, who has the advantage over Rout of an insider's perspective, admits that "I was one of the ones that was against having somebody white in the organisation. Whites were always having something. They always run everything, come in and take over our stuff, but this was something black we had created, something of our own, and we should keep it black." Such a mentality was something that Myers had in common with Malcolm X, and those he influenced. Well-meaning whites often did more harm than good; this was about black self-determination, and there was no problem with whites as such, but the process of explicit co-operation could only come about once the generally racist conditions of America had changed to a significant extent.

Myers admits that she has since changed her views – and they were undoubtedly very much of their time (though that shouldn't diminish their validity at that moment in history). Today, she believes that "music is open, and that's what I look at now. There's got to be a spiritual quality, regardless of what the color is." I tend to sympathise with the thought-currents that led to Emanuel's expulsion, if not the expulsion itself – but they are undoubtedly problematic, and many in the organisation at the time did not share them to such an extreme extent.

One might also note that, despite the very heavy focus on racial injustice, there was often a strongly sexist element to male-female relationships in the free jazz world, with the woman expected to be the supportive home-maker who was there for her man while he went out on his musical explorations (see the relevant chapter in Val Wilmer's 'As Serious as Your Life'). Of course, as a blanket statement, this is entirely inaccurate – think of Sam and Beatrice Rivers' Studio RivBea, Ornette Coleman's marriage to poet Jayne Cortez, or the relationship between Sonny and Linda Sharrock – but there is still an element of truth to the accusations of sexism. In a valuable sub-section of chapter eleven, entitled 'Leading the Third Wave: The New Women of the AACM', Lewis discusses the issue of gender politics. Multi-instrumentalist and composer Maia recounts how she asked Phil Cohran: "When we as black people reach utopia, reach this point that we're reaching for, is that when you're going to deal with this issue that we have between men and women? Because the black revolution is more about the revolution of black men. The problems that exist between men and women existed before racism came about." There's a slight confusion as to whether the AACM membership was predominantly male because of residual sexism from certain quarters, or whether the situation was more complicated. Maia suggests that the problem was not so much deliberate exclusion as a (perhaps inaccurate) perception of the AACM as what Douglas Ewart calls "a man's club." "The revolution was about black men. Nobody meant women any harm. But if you don't have on a fire suit, you ain't gonna go into no fire. It may have been open to women, but if it is not inviting to women, women are not going to come." So, it was clearly important that artists like Maia, Nicole Mitchell and Shanta Nurullah began to form all-female groups, to highlight female creativity, and the validity of female contributions to black experimental music.

As indicated by such a discussion, nobody is claiming that the AACM is perfect, least of all Lewis; what makes it such an important organisation is that its members acknowledge areas of complexity or disagreement, and seek to work through these. Such an attitude that was there from the start, as made clear by the transcription of the very first AACM meetings, from May 1965, in chapter four, 'Founding the Collective.' A major virtue of the book, then, is that it is not sanitised; that it shows the contradictions and struggles of the organisation, at the same time as the way that it remained, as the title puts it, 'a power stronger than itself', representing something much bigger than the Chicago jazz scene, and providing a model for all such initiatives. This is what is overlooked by those who criticise the October Revolution in Jazz, the Jazz Composers' Guild, or the AACM, by those who argue that the ideals of self-determination and creative autonomy shared by these bodies are laudable but inevitably fail. The AACM was not intended to be the solution to everyone's problems, but was firmly rooted in the realities of a specific socio-economic, musical and racial situation, and was therefore in a good position to make an impact (on a local level, and perhaps further, as with the migration to New York). Thanks to Lewis, this is now clearer than ever; that should silence those who claim that he lavishing a disproportionate amount of attention to the AACM.

The issues of race and gender are clearly of importance, then: also crucial to Lewis' investigations is the economic side of things. An academic not mentioned in the book, but relevant to the argument, is Ian Anderson, whose essay 'Jazz outside the Marketplace' contains an analysis of free jazz's growing reconciliation to capitalism, through funding and grants from banks and institutions, that may prove depressing reading to those who associated the music with radical political hopes. This would seem to fit with the standard narrative, to which there may be some truth, which would place the trend identified by Anderson alongside the failure of post-'68 activism, as evidence of the decline of the left. However, pessimism, leading on to capitulation, and, ultimately conformity, are what brought about this change in the first place, and to react in the same way is not the answer.

For, what Lewis' book offers, beyond informative and (generally) rigorous scholarship, is *hope*. Lewis shows how (predominantly black) self-organisation and self-promotion could provide a viable alternative to commercialisation, line-toeing and subservience to the greedy, exploitative machinations of big-time club-owners, promoters, and record company bosses. The AACM was not primarily a for-profit organisation –members contributed funds to keep things afloat at first, even if payments were not always diligently kept up, and proceeds from concerts were plunged into further musical developments and, importantly, educational and social projects. Thus, while the AACM was in the service of the art foremost, the art was intimately linked to the life. "My youngest son's wife called me," Jodie Christian recalls. "She said, do you know any place where they give piano lessons? I thought, the AACM, that's what they do. If that ever dies, then the AACM dies. That's what's holding it together. That, to me, is the backbone of the AACM." (P.506) One cannot understand the music without a knowledge of the socio-economic and racial conditions of Chicago (or, for that matter, America as a whole), and one gains a deeper appreciation of the AACM project if one realises its political significance, rather than simply seeing it as 'interesting' music. 'Interesting' music is what divorces the experimental tradition from a wider audience, creating an

ivory-tower elite (most notably in the classical music world) which the free jazz musicians sought to combat from the outset (Val Wilmer's 'As Serious As Your Life' provides further evidence of such ambitions).

Yes, perhaps some of the participants have gained (even courted) the support of the 'establishment' (George Lewis' own work at IRCAM, for instance, although that was a slightly strange episode, and one he felt somewhat uncomfortable with, I believe) - but, as Lewis argues, quite persuasively I think, the 'establishment' (the sort of 'high culture' institutions that Anderson argues have come to support free jazz) tended to (and still does tend to) look down on the music. As many, many people will tell you, it is still a struggling music – consider the state of free improvisation in the UK (the closure of one the major venues, the Red Rose; the cutting of funding for the LMC; and the post-Thatcherite bureaucratic muddle that complicates things still further). I think it's more the case that that a few token 'progressives' and 'radicals, get establishment support, as a means for the capitalist hierarchy to appear 'progressive' and 'liberal', at the same time as denting the subversive force of the art they have 'embraced.' When trumpeter Bill Dixon was featured on a BBC Radio 3 programme devoted to 'new music', for instance, his work was treated with a marked lack of respect, in comparison to the numerous classical composers that the programme features, week in, week out. Underlying it all, I'm afraid to say, is a residual racism that is all the more pernicious for being unconscious. If Dixon, one of the most important instrumentalists and composers of the past forty years, is characterised as "mad," there's not much hope for the free music project being taken seriously.

I mentioned the danger of elitism for (predominantly white, classical) experimental music, and there are those who criticise black experimental music in a similar manner, as elitist and inherently anti-popular. These charges are not hard to repudiate, and the connection between the black avant-garde and popular music should not need too much defending – Amiri Baraka had always maintained that Albert Ayler and James Brown were equally important as figures of black self-consciousness and self-expression (see his essay 'The Changing Same'), and Lewis provides a corroborating anecdote about Henry Threadgill playing "free" in evangelical meetings (pp.75-6). Yet the other attack, often from critics with a black power agenda, like Baraka or Stanley Crouch, needs addressing – that connections with European classical music (Braxton, Cecil Taylor, and George Lewis with Cage, Stockhausen and IRCAM) are betrayals of blackness, 'whitening' the music and rendering it impotent, effectively obscuring and ignoring a part of one's identity as an African-American by moving away from one's heritage. This leads Baraka to claim that he would prefer to listen to the hegemonic comfort of Wynton Marsalis' revivalism than to Lester Bowie or Henry Threadgill (though he believes that they too should have "regular stages" (p.444)). Lewis' book is crucial in this respect, showing how misguided such criticisms are, and how the AACM's avant-garde approach actually stays truer to heritage than Marsalis' more overt engagements with black tradition. Maybe the Lincoln centre 'jazz neo-conservatism' is on its way out by now, though Stanley Crouch is still yelling out its propaganda at the top of his voice – still, for those taken with its proclamations, it might be helpful to consider this: who would berate contemporary rock musicians for not sounding like Hendrix, or contemporary composers for not sounding like Vivaldi?

Lewis, then, persuasively shows how much criticism of the work of black experimentalists, from both black and white critics, is based on outmoded principles and simplistic assumptions that might have people up in arms if applied to white composers - hence the famous 'anti-jazz' slur on Coltrane, and the assumption that one must be in the tradition (this mysterious, *single* tradition, always prefixed by the definite article) or one is nothing, and hence the straitjacketing of people to fit rules that you yourself have artificially imposed onto them. I don't have the space to go into it here, but there are some crucial passages in which he argues that the anecdotalism of (predominantly white) 1950s and 60s jazz criticism (such as Leonard Feather's 'Blindfold Tests') deliberately stirred up antagonism, and opened up a false and unnecessary chasm between traditional musicians and experimentalists, as well as creating a simplified and distorted climate, ill-suited for the reception of music (like the AACM's) that went beyond a certain level of complexity, that went outside the bounds of certain fairly strict parameters.

In conclusion, then, Lewis has much to say that is relevant and of interest, in relation to perceptions of music, and ways of avoiding the capitalist norm (communal, self organisation, art and mastery of a craft valued over 'product' and the market). Most relevant is his penetrating analysis of the still-present subtle and perhaps unconscious racial discrimination that exists when talking about this music: put the black man in his place, don't let him mix his entertaining jazz with serious music of any kind - hence the criticism of Braxton for taking an interest in Stockhausen. There are numerous thought-provoking passages which really do change one's perceptions of things might have just taken for granted - but I'll leave individual readers to discover these for themselves.

In the end, despite compromises that may have had to be made (the move to New York, while creatively fruitful), and difficulties overcome. As attested to by the work of Anthony Braxton, Muhal Richard Abrams, Wadada Leo Smith, and Lewis himself, these artists are still as creative as ever, and, even if some have moved beyond the AACM, they retain its ethos in all their activities. The younger generation is thriving too, and is in a reciprocal relationship with the older generation of pioneers, as seen in such examples as the collaboration between Matana Roberts and Fred Anderson on her album 'The Chicago Project' (reviewed elsewhere in this issue). Characterising all these diverse activities is a strongly-held belief in the power of music as a force for good - not in a vague utopian sense, but as something that can have a real and positive impact on the lives of human beings. As Nicole Mitchell puts it, "we take for granted the power of what music really is. It's not about trying to make a few dollars at some concert. It's not about, do we have a crowd, or do I have an image, or have I, quote-unquote, made it." (p.512) What it is about is the substance of this book. **(Review by David Grundy)**



GIG REVIEWS

- **DELTA SAXOPHONE QUARTET/ HUGH HOPPER**

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (February 2008)

- **WAYNE SHORTER QUARTET**

Barbican Hall, London (April 2008)

- **ALEXANDER HAWKINS ENSEMBLE**

Churchill College Recital Room, Cambridge (May 2008)

- **CORSANO/ BEVAN / LASH**

The Wheatsheaf, Oxford (July 2008)

- **SAKOTO FUJII MIN-YOH ENSEMBLE**

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon (August 2008)

DELTA SAXOPHONE QUARTET WITH HUGH HOPPER KETTLE'S YARD, CAMBRIDGE, 8/2/2008.

The Delta Saxophone Quartet are using instrumentation generally associated with jazz, but this isn't the World Saxophone Quartet: for one, they focus far more on British music, and for another they are far more likely to perform composed classical pieces than to launch into searing improvisations. This project, then, is something of a departure, in that one might expect it to lean more towards rock music, yet one must not forget that Soft Machine were always a band with a strong jazz pedigree – they had far more jazz in them than many of the dire fusion acts that were marketed as jazz in the 70s and 80s. The presence of Softs' bassist Hugh Hopper lends some historical credibility to the 'tribute project' – though re-interpretation/ re-imagining sounds a whole lot better, and is probably closer to the spirit of the thing.

In fact, Hopper guests on just one track on the group's album of Soft Machine compositions, 'Dedicated to You...But You Weren't Listening', so here was a good opportunity to expand on that, as he joined them for a whole gig, with a chance to flesh out their collaboration, and tackle some additional material. Also joining the group, giving things a greater rhythmic emphasis in line with the jazz/rock flavour of Hopper's compositions, was drummer Simon Pearson.

In fact, both Hopper and Pearson were featured sparingly in the first half of the concert, which instead was devoted to predominantly composed pieces, played by the Quartet, in a classical/ minimalist/ pastoral vein akin to some of Gavin Bryars' more accessible work (and more in line with the group's previous recordings). In itself, this was attractive, and the four-saxophone texture yielded some smooth and sonorous sounds, but ultimately what was played was not all that memorable – even soprano player Graeme Bevins' use of electronics (mainly loops and echoes controlled by foot pedals) was so-so, coming across as a more of a gimmick than something integrated fully into the music. When Hopper did solo (making more interesting use of electronics, something he has worked with for a number of years), the mood was rudely interrupted by Simon Pearsons' drums (clattering, loud, and aggressive) and all the looped soundscape detail was consequently rather hard to pick up. Unfortunately, then, it appeared that there was a somewhat tenuous balance between the pretty but rather insubstantial quartet pieces, and

Pearons' attempt to ratchet things up a notch, which instead spoiled the mood and didn't really come up with a convincing alternative.

In the second half, though, things picked up, with Hopper playing far more, a short guest appearance by Japanese pianist Yumi Hara Caukwell, and a greater focus on the Soft Machine material. Tunes like 'Kings and Queens' and 'Facelift' still sound fresh, and more substantial than a lot of the rather sketchy material that made up the 'heads' at the start of jazz-rock bands' improvisatory workouts (think Miles Davis' construction of pieces from repeating riffs and minimal melodic fragments). The best piece on the night, though, was the least polished, the most raw (they'd first played it through in its entirety the day before): a length treatment of the Soft Machine classic 'Esther's Nose Job.' Hopper's groovy bass line leant a firm foundation for saxophone pyrotechnics, highlights being the impressive Pete Whyman, stretching out for an alto solo, and a short section for free baritone and drums only, before things ended with a haunting pastoral.

Overall, I'd say that the concert was probably too long – despite the variety of different instrumental configurations and the attempt to mix things up by juxtaposing the Soft Machine material with classical pieces, the Delta Quartet couldn't quite sustain things for two hours. As the evening wore on, though, they succeeded in generating something like energy that Soft Machine themselves generated in their 70s rock-crowd gigs, leavened with a melancholy delicacy that was best in small amounts.

WAYNE SHORTER QUARTET
BARBICAN HALL, LONDON, 25/4/2008.



Wayne Shorter's music is not useful - at least, not in the limited sense of immediately visible, practical results, with which the word is invariably associated in today's world of 'targets' and form-ticking. But is precisely because of this that such art, has value, and I feel it important to stress the point in the case of a musician whose work means a damn sight more to me than many more ostensibly 'useful' things.

Shorter's music isn't going to visibly change the world. It won't stop famine, it won't cure AIDS, it won't prevent needless wars from being fought and needless blood from being shed the world over. It won't cure cancer, it won't discover the secret of eternal life, it won't stop racism, it won't get rid of social inequality.

But who's to say that life is just about that? All great art, essentially, is about encountering and discovering elements of what it means to be human, and whether it does this through direct social and political engagement, as in the work of countless artists whose work has precipitated, laid the grounds for, and participated in change, or through more indirect, elliptical forms - as with the music of Wayne Shorter - it's just as vital to our continued existence as the practical realms of science, healthcare and the like.

Anyway, who says that to counteract dogma, to counteract creeds that are killing people across the world, what is required is an equal dose of dogma? Perhaps an alternative can be sought - not a total escape, or even an evasion, but another pathway, a third way, if you like. In that sense, Shorter's music is a manifesto in itself, affirming that there are some things which are out of the reach of the system, which create true value, value outside the monetary.

But enough of that. Let's get down to specifics. Much of Shorter's music is about tension - between structure and freedom, between the rhythm section (which often keeps things grounded in grooves and swing) and angular saxophone abstractions. On a record such as 1967's 'Schizophrenia', for example, 'Tom Thumb' is based around a really memorable groove, but with quite experimental solos. Or, to take another case, 'Speak No Evil', from a few years earlier, with its bop and swing base for more fairly 'out' soloing.

Or, most notably, the version of 'Visitor from Nowhere' at the Barbican in 2006, where Perez' repeated chords and Blade's crashing drumming, accentuating them, created an inexorable feel that simultaneously needed release and felt like it would (and must) never end as Shorter screamed and screamed the melody on soprano sax. In the end, it just died away - there was just nowhere more to go, no way to go beyond what had just been created - until the next concert, that is. Absolutely fantastic.

In all these examples, the relatively solid base - rhythmic, harmonic, melodic - makes the music more effective than if it had just been a case of free jazz flying on its own, with purely the invention of the players to sustain it. I'm sure Shorter could play equally well in that context - in fact, I know he could - just take a listen to his *burning* playing with Chick Corea, Dave Holland and Jack de Johnette in Miles Davis' 'Lost Quintet'. But the special ability of his current quartet in particular is to evoke the same sort of feelings - of possession, transportation, of being forced to *listen* and become caught up in the experience of a whole-body musical experience - that free jazz does.

My last experience of the Shorter Quartet was at the same venue - the Barbican Hall. I vividly remember emerging from the doors, fresh from the experience of, among other things, that afore-mentioned version of 'Visitor from Nowhere', then walking down the stairs, and overhearing a couple of other concert goers. The guy was expounding vigorously on the virtues of the concert to his girlfriend, as if he couldn't quite believe

what he'd just seen, illustrating one of WS's sudden soprano sax screams with a vigorous upward hand motion, captivated by the sheer perfect logical oddness of WS's playing.

That sort of wonder is what WS's music inspires, and I'm sure that's what everyone was hoping he would reproduce as he returned to England for the first time since that triumphant Barbican performance two years ago. As with that memorable occasion, things began in a somewhat tentative fashion, despite Shorter whistling into the microphone, a playful call to attention. A reticent Blade seemed to be prodding Shorter, trying to get him to set out his ground; in the end, it was left to Perez, Pattitucci and Blade to establish a preliminary direction while Shorter (who always appears to be somewhat nervous) fidgeted with his saxophones, picking up first one, then the other, before playing the first, inquisitive notes on tenor; taking a few preliminary footsteps before leaping further and further out into the "unknown" region that he's claimed to be reaching for in interviews. An arco bass solo lead to a bass/piano duet, Shorter came in with a mysterious free ballad, concentrating on a smooth upper register, his flowing, trilling phrases matched by Perez' floridity. The 'tunes' as such are surrounded by interludes – often piano and bass duets, or bass and piano solos, and so the music may feel a little stop-start, at least to those used to the theme-solos-theme structure; this was more like a jigsaw puzzle where things only slot together and make complete sense once every piece is correctly connected. Whether you characterise it as nervousness or probing patience, it wasn't until 17 minutes in that Shorter really let rip, blowing loudly, and then going silent for two minutes to let the music build again.

And so it went on: music packed with incident and elegance, lyricism and passion, in which the participants displayed to the full their instrumental virtuosity yet were sensitive enough to allow the occasional reduction of elements to their simplest form, for dramatic effect. A few familiar tunes appeared, even if, more often than not, they were merely hinted at, never fully stated (such was the case with 'She Moves Through the Fair'). The lengthy performances, though, were clearly structured, however much freedom and spontaneity they allowed – Perez' piano was covered with sheet music, and Shorter's little hand signals, or just quick glances (tricks learned from Miles Davis) saw him functioning as 'musical director', not just saxophonist. Perhaps this was more experimental than the 2006 Barbican date – the band entering a new phase, exploring different areas, in order to prevent sterility. It sounded, for example, as though several new compositions, or sketches were being used, several of them focussing on repetitive or march-like piano vamps (again, that pull between grounding grooves and abstract speculations).

For the encore, Shorter whistled a familiar melody – grinned – and then launched into the obligatory dramatic climax, this time centred around 'Midnight on Carlota's Hair', a melody of mysterious dark beauty and velvet sensuality. He delivered swirling tone colours, first on tenor and then soprano, but it was clear that this was all build-up; what he wanted to do was to play the melody LOUD, to repeat it over and over. And yet stasis was avoided – a combination of timing, sound quality/ timbre and control of volume/ dynamics, created a wonderful pent-up impact. Blade abandoned his sticks to hit the drums with his hands; then woozy soprano, a focus on just one note for a quiet ending, yet with an impact that was deafening, translating itself into delighted applause.

**ALEXANDER HAWKINS ENSEMBLE
CHURCHILL COLLEGE RECITAL ROOM, CAMBRIDGE, 18/5/2008.**

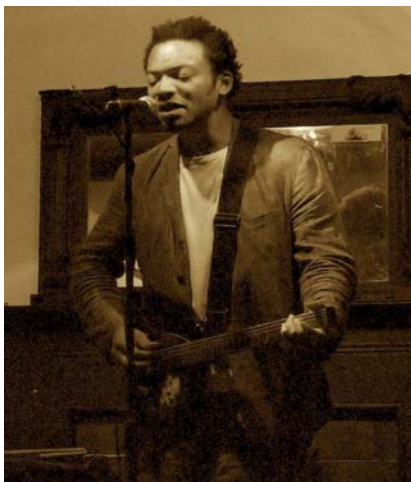
As you'll have seen from the comprehensive interview earlier on the magazine, Alexander Hawkins is a musician very conscious of jazz roots, of antecedents, at the same time as being aware of the necessity to develop his own personal means of expression without being overwhelmed by the weight of past or present peers. Informed by his awareness of musical history, then, he feels equipped to take risks, and that really manifests itself with this group – first, in choosing such an unusual combination of instruments (this may be the first piano/guitar/steel pan/cello/bass/drums ensemble in existence!) and second, in the choice of material – a couple of Anthony Braxton charts, some Sun Ra and Leo Smith mixed in with Duke Ellington and original compositions.

Opening proceedings, though, were local group Assembly Point Three, operating that night as a trio (although they are usually a quartet named Assembly Point Four, with pianist Tom Wood being the fourth member). Saxophonist Josh Ison's tone was burnished and burly, hard-edged yet not overly steely, progressive yet clearly working within the vocabulary of jazz. His playing, and that of the group as a whole, struck me as having something of the spirit of a musician like Tim Berne, working within quite strict parameters. In Berne's case, these parameters would be the knotty, lengthy phrases of his own sprawling, spiraling compositions; in Ison's, they were the traditional vocabulary of sax and rhythm section interaction. Also praiseworthy were Rick Hudson's un-flashy, head-down drumming and Michael Chilcott's versatile bass work.

In the second half, the Hawkins Ensemble began with the not inconsiderable challenge of putting their own spin on Anthony Braxton's 'Composition No. 40 (O).' It came off well: the somewhat hard-edged sound afforded by the piano/vibes/guitar combination (perhaps counterbalanced by the warmer sound of Marshall's bowed cello playing) suited Braxton's writing down to a tee, although occasionally I missed the presence of a trumpet or saxophone to add a 'hot' element into the mix. Elsewhere, Hawkins' own compositions showed a Braxton-esque spikiness, with the playful, street-wise feel of 'Cowley Road Strut' particularly standing out. There was structural boldness, too; rather than the usual theme-solos-theme-applause structure that might suit a jazz club atmosphere, things were more suite-like, as pieces smoothly segued together (this was a classical recital room, after all). The band seemed more concerned with teasing out the nuances of the compositions they were playing (as opposed to using them as an attractive opening gambit before the serious business of the solos gets underway) and with creating ensemble textures, than with anyone taking a lead – though that's not to imply that they were directionless, playing with a collective focus, an intensity of purpose that belied their different backgrounds and individual modes of expression. Thus, it was a particularly selfless performance – for a young band-leader, perhaps it's inevitable that one might want to show off one's chops (especially if they're as well-developed as Hawkins'), and for a jazz legend like Orphy Robinson, the best-known member of the group, the temptation might also have been to showboat – but neither of these things happened, which was very pleasant to see.

Moments of repose were a beautiful five-minute solo feature for Otto Fischer, delicately vocalizing what sounded like a love song (he wasn't using a microphone, so the words were a little hard to hear) while accompanying himself on guitar, and a

wonderful Hawkins solo piano feature in which he enthusiastically dived inside the instrument to pluck the strings and whizzed around the keyboard in between extemporizing on Ellington's 'Warm Valley' (a tune whose provenance I couldn't place when I heard it played live, but which stayed in my head for several days afterward). 'Love in Outer Space', always one of the catchiest Sun Ra numbers, exploiting its lilting, joyous potential to the full, and the band closed on a note of solemn, almost hymnal hush with Leo Smith's minor-key 'Nuru Light: The Prince of Peace', dedicated to Martin Luther King, to which the combined sound of Hannah Marshall's cello and Dom Lash's bass was particularly suited.



Bits of the whole scope of jazz tradition then – it wouldn't have surprised me if they'd burst out into a Jelly Roll Morton number, arranged free-jazz style – and a truly collective, ego-free group, making a sound that was frequently pleasant, in mainstream terms, but was also not afraid to take things further out when necessary.

A new CD is in the offing (in fact, the recording session came the day after this concert), and, if this particular performance was anything to go by, it should be a really interesting listen. Watch this space.

CHRIS CORSANO/ TONY BEVAN / DOMINIC LASH THE WHEATSHEAF, OXFORD, 6/7/2008.

In the small, half-empty upstairs room of an Oxford pub, three musicians were exploring musical possibilities and the possibility of mixing individual assertiveness with collaborative interaction and co-operation. Drummer Chris Corsano, perhaps best known for the power psychadelia of his duo with Mick Flower, and fresh from a tour with Bjork, has shown himself to be equally capable in numerous different contexts, one of them being free improvisation; Tony Bevan has the seal of approval of legendary drummer Sunny Murray (he appears in a trio with Murray and bassist John Edwards on 'The Gearbox Explodes!' from 2006), and Dom Lash is one of the busiest and most reliable improv bassists around.

The first set begins with Bevan on tenor, playing straight free jazz (if there can be said to be such a thing), as he gradually raises his sound from one level to another, further and further into altissimo ranges. Lash takes a short bass solo, exploiting weird arco harmonics after a short, plucked prelude with a Jimmy Garrison feel; a sad, almost subdued feel, sounds dragged downwards, the suggestion of a motor. Bevan's re-entry seems to force a little more conventionality on things (not necessarily his fault – it's just that the sound of the saxophone has so many connotations) - and there's a free jazz finish.

Bevan switches to soprano for the second piece. An edgy, punchy opening sees Corsano sticking cloths over the drums to mute the sound. Soprano skitter, bird flutter, trilled ululations. Lash comes in circling over the strings with his bow, Corsano

introduces shakers, bells. Sax becomes more flowing over bowed bass. Soon we're back to free jazz, Bevan walking with an occasional, somewhat Coltraneish reedy tone – as he did when playing tenor, he introduces a few melodic phrases, partly as respite yet still settled in the flow of free sax note-shudders. Corsano delivers pell-mell thunder from drum to drum with cymbal bursts to accentuate, or, as here, to ride while Lash pluck-scrapes in a vaguely jazzy manner. The bass is eerie arco again, the soprano back in with a piercing shriek, Corsano places a cymbal on the snare, holds it in place with both feet and vigorously scrapes across it with two bows. All three instruments concentrated into little high sonorities, soprano hissing noises, all creating a kind of intense sustain very hard to maintain at these pitches. Corsano is blowing into some sort of mouthpiece at the end of curved black tube, his head contorted to one side. If the first piece felt like a saxophonist leading a rhythm section, this is a much more integrated experience, and the better for it.

Once more, Bevan switches horns, this time to the massive beast that is the bass saxophone, on which he achieves a surprising fluidity (without sacrificing the instrument's gnarly quality). From his fingers and breath emerges an out of breath howl, wind struggling to make itself heard, the gasp of a death rattle, whoops and low growls. Lash grinds the bass strings, then plays behind them, while Corsano bows on what sounds like a deconstructed bass (just one of the accoutrements he adds to the conventional drum kit). There's a great concentration on *sounds* here, which I would say lends the music more of an improv aesthetic than a free jazz aesthetic (perhaps dictated by the unwieldy nature of Bevan's instrument as much as anything, although there does seem to have been a gradual progression throughout the concert.) It's as if the three players are hovering in the suspenseful anticipation of an event about to happen, but don't want to spoil things by launching in with clunky 'moving on' devices; the music is waiting to explode, or just to slip back under the surface, like bubbles in the ice.

Bevan spins out solemn, slow melodies– this instrument can't help but sound ominous, yet he introduces a plaintive lyrical quality as well, as he tells the story of some lament. A Ken Vandermark-esque riff releases things; Corsano switches back to the conventional drum kit, keeping up an almost constant cymbal spatter while the sax eases in, becomes more confident, strides out (but of course always with that edge, the memory of the sad/ sinister opening). Fragility underlies the ostensible brawniness of this straighter free jazz section, emerging in full cry as despairing high yells are juxtaposed with low-down honks; not so much self-dialogue as self-combat. Things are on the verge of hysteria, an altissimo shrieking figure repeats itself over and over but finds nowhere to go, so things subside for something more serene-sinister, with Corsano on the brushes and Lash playing arco once more. They constantly avoid full-blown balladry, yet constantly hint at it as well – a menacing tenderness, given added colour by the eerie, almost robotic multiphonics that emerge from the bass sax.

A long, sustained note leaves just bass and drums, working round an idea that first came in behind that note. Voice-like, Mingus 'What Love' wood-snap as Bevan wipes his brow, bell harmonics and Corsano's bowing over his stringed implements...Solemn lament introduced on tenor sax, undercut by scittery metallic percussion (Corsano at this point doing anything to avoid conventional beating implements, it seems – using his hands, knives and forks, to make a familiar kit seem strange again). Volume rising, Corsano returning to the sticks, really getting it, loud batteries, surges, Bevan eyes closed,

red-faced blowing, momentarily takes out sax mouthpiece and emits a human scream. No let-up, things only stop when the mouthpiece gets fucked up, and, adapting to circumstance, bass and drums abruptly finish.



**SATOKO FUJII MIN-YOH ENSEMBLE: 'JAZZ EM AGOSTO',
FOUNDATION CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN, LISBON, 02/08/2008.**

Portugal's 'Jazz Em Agosto' festival is a very good thing. Having caught a screening of Hans Hylkema and Thierry Bruneau's 1991 film on Eric Dolphy, 'Last Date', I made my way over the small modern-day amphitheatre, set just opposite the Centre of Modern Art in the grounds of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In the next few days, concert-goers could look forward to John Zorn in duet with Fred Frith, Brotzmann's Chicago Tentet, Sylvie Courvoisier, Taylor Ho Bynum, and Barre Philips.

On this night, it was the turn of pianist Satoko Fujii, fronting a quartet which was evenly split between Americans and Japanese: Fujii and her husband Natsuki Tamura, trombonist Curtis Hasselbring, and accordionist/ electronics whiz Andrea Parkins. The music varied widely, opening with a free jazz burst, then fading to moments when the music all but turned to silence, piano whisperings barely heard beneath an incessant cicada buzz, a strong breeze, and low-flying aircraft overhead. The outdoor location undoubtedly helped add to the music's atmosphere, emphasizing the delicacy of these

quiet moments as they serendipitously meshed with environmental sounds. Fujii aimed at enhancing the texture through the sporadic deployment of prepared piano, as did Parkins, with her control of foot pedals allowing the accordion to sound almost like a dislocated, disturbed organ. Hasselbring was a worthy soloist too, providing jazzier articulations while around him backgrounds kept on changing, as if he was an actor in front of an aural blue-screen. It was Nakamura, though, who was for me the most impressive musician on the night, his solos filled with broken notes and stuttering cries, hesitant yet authoritative dramatic monologues causing an intense focusing in of my listening. They asked for, and rewarded close attention.

The band consistently focused on ‘inside-outside’ articulations, building on antitheses and contrasts: silence and noise / starting and stopping / ensemble and solo / east and west / voice and electronics. In itself, that’s not an automatic recommendation (many contemporary bands tread similar tightropes); perhaps most interesting were the ethnic twists and resonances resulting from the unusual instrumental line-up and the way it was employed. Thus, the accordion, with its European folk music associations, met with Fujii’s rippling, ‘classically-trained’ Steinway sounds, and, towards the end, her vocalizations of traditional Japanese folk songs (‘Min Yoh’ is the Japanese for ‘folk music’). Such dimensions can be fascinating, yet this was not a lengthy concert by any means, and perhaps one of those experiences that one appreciates and enjoys, without being consistently drawn in, consistently engaged. Still, this band is just one of the worthwhile enterprises in which Fujii’s involved, and the gig was a nice opportunity to see her at work. **(All gig reviews by David Grundy)**

And that brings this issue to an end...More journeys for your ears in a few months.

List of Contributors

Centrifuge runs ‘If You Know What I’m Saying’, a blog devoted to his writing on the music of Anthony Braxton (<http://ifyouknowwhatimsaying.blogspot.com>).

Noa Corcoran-Tadd studies Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University.

Roger Farbey, a jazz critic, runs the ‘Ian Carr + Nucleus’ website (<http://www.iancarrsnucleus.net/>) and ‘Remember Tubbs: A Tubby Hayes Website’ (<http://www.geocities.com/tubbs1935/>).

Stef Gijssels runs the excellent ‘Stef’s Free Jazz reviews’ blog (<http://stef-freejazz.blogspot.com>), from which his contributions here are taken.

David Grundy studies English at Cambridge University.

Daniel Melnick’s writing can be viewed at <http://soundslope.com>.

Tomasz Nadrowski runs ‘Sonic Asymmetry’ (<http://sonicasymmetry.wordpress.com/>), a blog chronicling some “extraordinary auditory experiences.”

Anthony Whiteford, a saxophonist, has been involved in improvised music in the Bristol area for a number of years.

With thanks to: Alexander Hawkins, Hugh Hopper, Jordon Schrantz/Tiger Asylum Records, Phil Hargreaves, Nick Stephens, Cold Blue Music, and Luke Mosling (Porter Records).